STARTLING STORIES

FEATURING

HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS

A NOVEL OF ALIEN EARTH

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

THIS WAY TO MARS

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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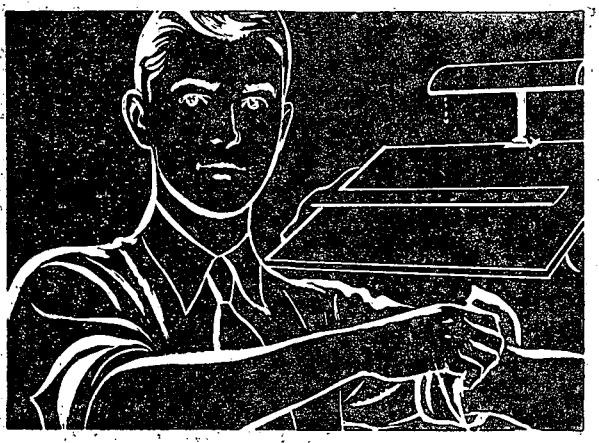

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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 24, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION September, 1951

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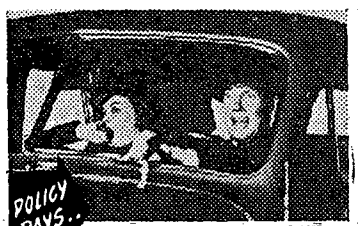

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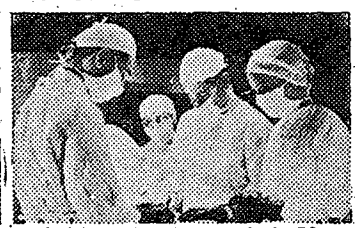

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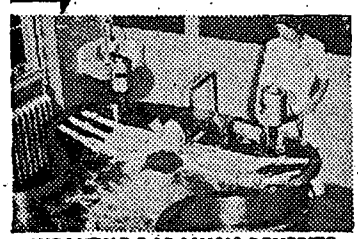

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PROPHETS, regardless of the accuracy of their prevision, are notoriously without honor in their own climes and times. It is only after their predictions have been proved correct by subsequent events—usually long after their deaths—that people tend to take them seriously.

Yet the desire to know what lies ahead is a universal urge. Some of us wish fore-knowledge of the stock-market, others of tomorrow's sixth at Belmont, others of what the weather will be next Saturday. And, since most of us have small faith in current prophets, we cast about for substitutes that seem to us more worthy of consideration.

For market plungers we have all sorts of market analyses, purporting to tell us just what will happen to those ten shares of *Old Insolvent Industries Common* over the next six months. For race-track and bookie devotees we have all sorts of tip-sheets and form sheets, telling us not only what *Galloping Gluepot II* will do on the morrow but why. And for weather we have not only daily forecasts but quarterly regional trend statements.

In business affairs an item called *market research* has become a staple reliance by industrialists in a frenzy as to which of two or three packaging or display jobs will sell more of their products. In entertainment, television and radio producers and sponsors have taken their orders from something called the Nielson poll as well as the Crossley and Hooper rating systems. And Mr. George Gallup "scientifically" predicts just about everything else.

A Debatable Procedure

There must be hundreds if not thousands of other businesses which achieve marginal existence by authoritatively "predicting" trends and events to come in various branches of industry, politics and the arts. And so strong is the desire of producer and salesman and merchant and speculator to know what lies ahead that they continue to spend their money (or that of their stockholders) on such services no matter how unreliable they may be in method and result.

Whether it deals with people en masse, in small groups or as individuals the forecast is a highly debatable procedure—because it deals with people. And people are notoriously ornery and unreliable as to future behavior, even when emerging thoroughly psyched or cleared from psychiatrist's or dianetics auditor's couch.

Human behavior is completely understandable when all the factors that govern it are understood—but to achieve understanding or even knowledge of all such factors in advance is a rugged proposition. Back in 1936, for instance, the *Literary Digest* put on its umpty-teenth presidential poll. Over several decades it had been conducting similar polls in advance of elections, had never once been wrong.

It predicted a win for Governor Alfred M. Landon over FDR and was out of business within a year or less. And Messrs. Gallup and other pollsters of today are still staggering from the lacing they took in 1948 when Harry S. Truman did it to Tom Dewey.

Actually, in both instances, the pollsters simply asked the wrong people whom they favored. Their surveys were not representative of the electorate. In other words they had neither understood nor taken into account a basic shift in the voting population.

History Is Inconsistent

History, of course, is full of apparent inconsistencies that made Barbary apes of the most learned prognosticators. Genghis Khan, after swallowing all of Asia in one gulp with his Mongol hordes, suddenly stopped short at the gates of Vienna. More recently the egomaniac Adolph Hitler did just about everything possible to lose his vital war with Russia—and Japan committed military suicide in the Pacific by attacking Pearl Harbor.

Think it over. There were nothing but a few feudal knights between the Great Khan and the coasts of Portugal, France and Scandinavia.

(Continued on page 133)

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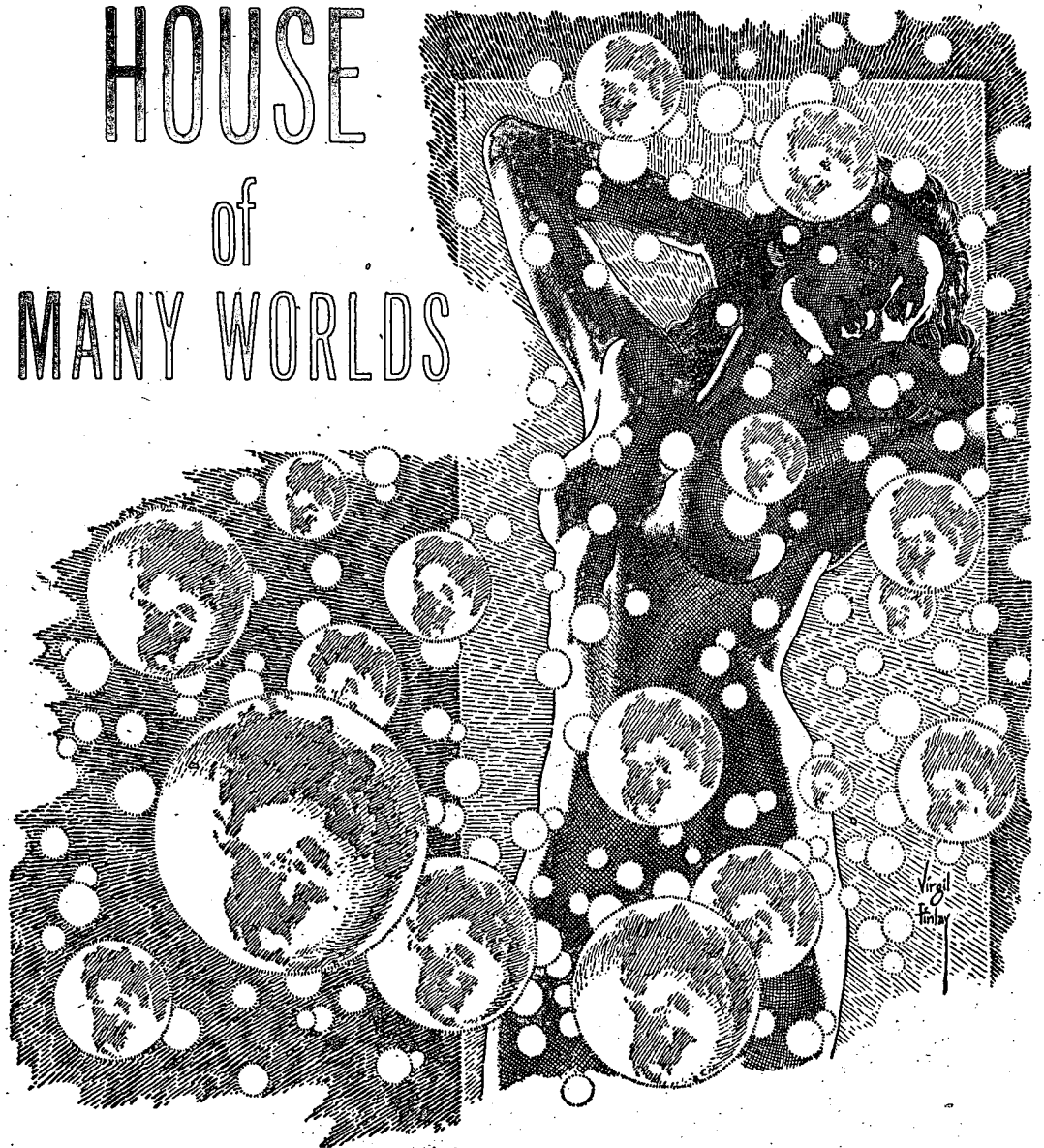

A Novel by
SAM MERWIN, Jr.

II

ELSPETH MARRINER fingered the sticky roundness of the thick tumbler on the gimpy-legged table in front of her and wondered what in heaven, earth or hell she was doing in the dingy little restaurant. As a poet

History turns upside down, when the South wins the Civil War and Napoleon founds an empire in Mexico!

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she knew it was her duty to have her feet in the mire as well as her head in the clouds, but this was going a little too far.

Seeking to shut out Mack's insistent and unsubtle prodding of the leather-skinned native he was plying with the hot and heavy liquid molasses that passed for rum in this incredibly backward little Carolina community, she concentrated on the strip of flypaper that dangled from the ceiling less than six feet from her head.

Alternate sections of its spiral glistened evilly in the dim reflection of the green-shaded lamp that hung beyond it. At intervals a trapped insect buzzed its hysterical protest at such unmannerly death as faced it. She counted the flies she could see trapped on its sticky surface. There were exactly fourteen, five more than had been there the night before.

FOURTEEN, she thought, the magic number that spells sonnet. She began to frame a sonnet to fourteen flies caught in a spiral of flypaper. Surely even such unpleasant living creatures merited some memorial to their passing.

She lost the thread, realized that her head was aching—whether from lack of sleep in the course of the assignment or from the badly fried food which was all the Carolina community seemed to offer or from the drink and a half of heavy rum she had consumed, she could not tell. Perhaps it was a combination of the three. If Mack didn't get her back to New York on the morrow, she would—

She glanced covertly at the photographer, who was leaning toward the native as if eager to hear his half-drunken blather. It would be nice to do something to wipe the conscientious eagerness from his face, she thought, from his too-old, too-young gladiator's face. According to Orrin Lewis, the hard-bitten and suave managing editor of *Picture Week*, who had teamed them for the assignment, Mack Fraser had once been a fighter. She believed him.

His nose was slightly flattened across the bridge, a trifle off center. His cheekbones were not quite symmetrical, as if one—the left—had been broken by a fist. His eyes had a sleepy look, which she suspected came from scar tissue on the upper lids.

SHE told herself she was being a snob, that she had no right to mind the fact he had been in the ring. But she could not help resenting the fact that he always treated her as if, merely because she had not struggled out of some similar gutter, she did not quite belong to the human race.

". . . and I'm telling you, Mack," the native was saying as the photographer signaled the bar for a refill, "that there's still some mighty funny stuff going on around here." He paused and the Adam's apple vibrated beneath the scaly skin of his turkey neck. "We don't make much talk of it to outsiders." He paused to chuckle. "Matter of fact we don't talk about it much among ourselves."

"What sort of things, Corey?" Mack asked quietly. He was leaning back in his chair now, apparently disinterested since his fish was nibbling at the bait. Elspeth thought it painfully obvious. If she were that naive—but she wasn't.

Lacking a waiter, the bartender himself, a large lame individual with faded blue eyes and thick hair on the backs of his fingers, brought drinks over to the men. The native, Corey, mumbled his thanks, lifted his glass with clumsy courtesy to Elspeth, who managed a lip smile. Then he downed half of it at a draught. Elspeth shuddered, but it had no visible effect on Corey.

"Well," Corey went on, planting his forearms on the table after wiping his mouth with one dirty sleeve, "it goes back a long way—some say to the Bankers and even beyond."

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"I've heard of *them*," said Elspeth, thinking she ought to put in something for the courtesy of the toast. "They used to do things to the beacon lights to force ships ashore on the Hatteras shoals and then loot them. Nice people."

JUANA

"That they weren't," said Corey, apparently missing her sarcasm. "Some say they killed ten thousand men—aye, and women and little children. They could not afford to let them live."

"But what's this 'funny stuff' you were telling us about?" said Mack. His voice, Elspeth thought, was not actually bad. But it was rough around the edges, not cut for subtlety. On the whole, it went with its owner.

"Some nights the lights still shine," said Corey, placing his gnarled fisherman's hands flat on the oilcloth table top. His voice dropped half an octave. "And when they are seen, things happen. Other times there's darkness—not even the stars shine through although there may not be a cloud in the sky. And that's worse."

"Not so fast, Corey," said Mack, his forehead furrowing. You say 'things' happen when these lights show. What sort of things?"

"Bad things—big things," the native told them. "Things like wars and troubles to match. Sometimes we don't get to know of them until a while after. But we know when they happen."

"Why is this darkness you speak of worse?" Mack inquired.

COREY hesitated and scratched his unkempt coarse black hair. He looked around him a trifle furtively and leaned forward. "It's hard to say," he told them, his voice low and hoarse, "but it is. You've got to see it when it happens to believe it."

"You mean the whole locality just blacks out?" Elspeth asked incredulously. Although their assignment, to come up with a romantic picture story about the Hatteras Keys and their inhabitants, had been a notable fizzle to date she was in no mood for haunts.

"Not so you'd notice," said Corey, regarding her as if she were a toddler who had failed to pass a first-grade test. "What I'm telling you is that Spindrift Key is the place."

He paused and Mack cut in with, "Let's see—that's the island just beyond the mouth of the inlet. Looks too well groomed for this story of ours. You mean to say that—"

"I mean to say that that's where these things happen," the native said earnestly. "Listen, you people may be outsiders, but you've been mighty decent to me. I wouldn't sell you short, not so you'd notice it. I know what I know."

"But the place *can't* be haunted," Mack protested. "I cruised around it with Elspeth just the other day on our way to the outer shoals. It looks like a Southdown estate compared to the rest

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of these desolate spots. And that big house is well kept up."

"Didn't say it was haunted," said Corey, looking aggrieved. "All I said was that's where things happen—have always happened."

"But doesn't someone live there?" Mack asked insistently.

"The Frenchman lives there—him and his people," said Corey. "His folks always have, far as we know."

"Frenchman?" said Elspeth, more to keep awake than to contribute to the conversation. She was desperately tired. Three days of traipsing to and about this rough-hewn Carolina country with Mack were enough to have any girl on the ropes.

"Foreigner, anyway. Got a French name—Horelle," said Corey.

MACK gave Elspeth a quick speculative look. Then, to the native, "Might be worth a visit. Will he be in tomorrow?"

"But we've got to get back to New—" Elspeth began.

"Can't tell you that," said Corey as if she hadn't spoken at all. "Sometimes he's there, sometimes he isn't."

"Someone must be there—a big place like that," said Mack.

"Can't tell you that either," said the native. "We leave the Spindrift folks pretty much alone. Always have. Suits them and us fine. But there's times it's empty ground."

Mack looked at the watch on his wrist. "It's only a little after eight," he said. "Could you get us out there, Corey?"

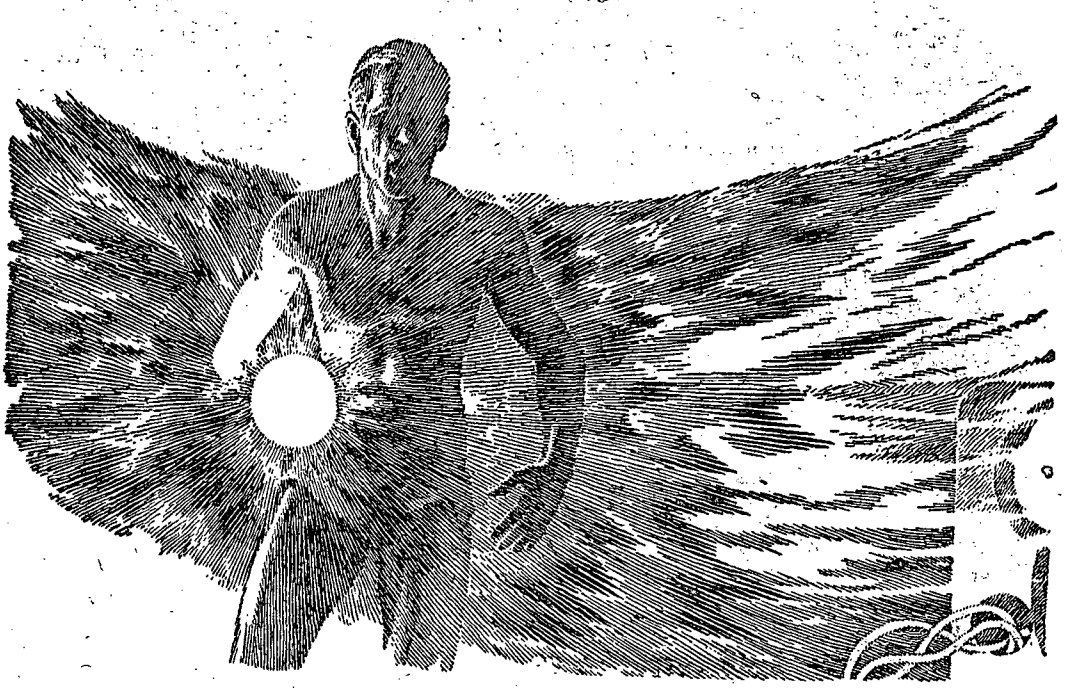
"I could," said Corey in a tone of deep reluctance. "Can't say Horelle likes visitors much."

"Mack, I'm beat," Elspeth protested. They had risen at five that morning so Mack could get shots of sunrise over the keys.

But the photographer was not to be denied. To her considerable surprise and disgruntlement Elspeth found herself, minutes later, standing outside the dingy restaurant in the poorly paved main street of the little Carolina town. Despite the earliness of the evening apparently most of the denizens had gone to bed.

"No wonder they have so many children," she murmured.

"Shut up," said Mack. "It's hard



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Juana dropped her gun as Everard swung the disintegrator toward her

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enough to get next to any of these natives without you insulting them. If you hadn't run the Pipit into that ditch we wouldn't have to have Corey take us over."

"I said I was sorry," she replied irritably. Mack's neat and shiny little English-made vehicle was reposing in the town's one garage thanks to a driving lapse of Elspeth. She had spotted a flock of bright red cardinal birds while guiding it along a high-crowned country lane, had managed to get the front wheels out of line in the resultant slip from the road.

"Hope the local mechanic doesn't butcher the Pipit," Mack said gloomily. It was like him, Elspeth thought, to worry over a vehicle. He was the same about his cameras. He was always fussing with them, handling them as if they were precious works of art. Elspeth, whose interest lay in nature, in people, in ideas and the emotional responses they aroused, had a certain contempt for machines. They were so—coldly tangible.

"I'm sleepy," she said, yawning with no attempt to cover it.

"After the way you've been beefing about the beds at the local hostelry," said Mack, his white teeth gleaming in the early darkness as he smiled, "I should think you'd be grateful for a chance to stay out of them for an extra hour or two."

"Your logic," said Elspeth coldly, "leaves me frigid."

"Just as it found you, eh?" said Mack, chuckling.

Mercifully Corey loomed up in the shadows of the street just then. He rolled a little as he walked, but Elspeth decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and put it down to his years on a fisherman's deck rather than to the rum he had consumed.

"This is a bit daft," he said, leading them toward the shimmer of moonlight on the water beyond the small quay at the end of the street. "Still, you people been mighty decent to me. If it'll do you any good, I'm glad to help. I'll wait at the dock."

"Listen," said Mack, fingering the case of the infrared camera which hung on a strap from his shoulder, "we'll be glad—"

"We wouldn't miss a moonlight trip on the water for anything," said Elspeth. She sensed intuitively that Corey would be hurt beyond words if Mack offered him money as he was going to. By way of emphasis she jabbed an elbow in the photographer's ribs.

"*Ouch!*" said Mack. He glared at her, and Corey stopped, turning to glance back at him with evident concern. The cameraman finally caught on and added, "Sorry. I must have stepped in a hole."

"Gotto watch your step in these parts," Corey told them.

His boat's lack of paint and its all-around battered appearance were not hidden by the moonlight. It smelled of machine oil and long-dead fish. Elspeth, who had considerable grace for a tall girl, scrambled aboard and found a seat near the stern, across the cockpit from Mack, who was smoking a cigarette.

"Light one for me, will you?" she asked. Illogically, although she prided herself on being able to meet men on equal grounds, she resented his not having offered her one. Mack complied casually and reached across the cockpit to hand it to her, forcing her to reach too. He was, she thought, a bit of a boor.

At that moment Corey got the big flywheel spinning, and the motor sputtered to life, seeming to cut the entire peaceful scene with its sharp barking sounds. It coughed, then caught and subsided to a steady thrum. Corey cast off and they putt-putted out across the dappled moonlight that seemed to dance in front of them.

"That Spindrift on our port bow?" Mack inquired moments later. Corey denied it, informed them they would not see their destination until they had rounded the point just ahead.

"Forgot the point," said Mack apologetically. Elspeth decided he was being

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subtle. They had seen the harbor layout from the Pipit just the afternoon before and Mack was not dumb about things like that. He was just dumb where it counted.

"There she is," Corey said after a silent fifteen minutes when his boat had made slow progress around the point.

ELSPETH, who had noticed the island earlier only as a civilized anachronism in the general desolation of their Hatteras surroundings, studied the dark rise of land ahead of them with interest. It was remarkable for its single low hill, for its obviously landscaped and well pruned trees, for the large white pillared mansion that reposed on its highest point.

"*Mack!*" she said, suddenly excited. "There are lights."

"Yeah," said the photographer. "Somebody seems to be home."

"That's not what I mean," protested Elspeth. "Didn't Mr. Corey just tell us that when there are lights on Spindrift, it—"

"They're just the lights in the big house windows," said the fisherman, unexcited. "They're not the lights I was meaning."

"What's different about *them?*" Elspeth wanted to know.

"It's hard to say exactly," replied Corey slowly. He hesitated, evidently seeking words beyond the limits of his meager vocabulary. "The lights I was meaning are higher up—and move."

"Could be St. Elmo's fire," said Mack casually. He had opened his camera case and was squinting through an infrared viewer. "Ought to be something for your story, Elly, in this. It's the first new slant we've come up with for Orrin."

"Nothing like an unhaunted house to spice up a travelogue," said Elspeth with definite irony. She disliked the fact that Mack spoke of Orrin Lewis as Orrin. Lewis still called her Miss Marriner.

"Could be St. Elmo's fire," said Corey, picking up the conversation several sentences back as if nothing had intervened. "But it isn't. It shows up on clear nights as well as rainy ones."

"These phenomena only occur at night?" the girl inquired.

"Whatever you call them, that's right," said Corey. "It's hard to explain. There are a lot of things hard to explain about Spindrift. Take those house lights—they weren't showing last night. The place was dark as my cellar."

"Maybe this—Horelle—was away and just got back," Mack suggested. He stood up to take a shot of the island.

"Sure—maybe," said Corey. "But if he was, when did he go? And how did he get back here without being seen?"

"We'll ask him and tell you about it on the way back," said Elspeth. In spite of herself she was beginning to get interested in Spindrift Key and its unseen inhabitants. It might be a boon to an otherwise dull picture story, after all.

"I'll be waiting," said Corey and there was something in his tone that caused Elspeth to glance sharply at the dark shape of him, standing up front, his hands on the wheel.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

He replied, without turning around, "Just what it says. I'll be waiting—unless I get word you don't want me to." He sounded as if he were not looking forward with pleasure to his vigil.

"We'll bring you word ourselves if this Mr. Horelle asks us to spend the night," said Mack, putting his night camera back into its case. He sat down, this time lit two cigarettes, handed one of them to Elspeth. "Nice night for haunting a house," he added.

"Shut up," she told him. It occurred to her that they had switched roles. Now she was the one who was genuinely interested in Spindrift Key while Mack had become the scoffer. This annoyed her and she told herself she was acting like an emotional fool.

"There's the dock," said Corey suddenly, pointing ahead.

They were coming in to a neat little pier whose base was lost in the shadow

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of a clump of poplars which made dark inverted fangs against the star-studded sky. Its white pilings gleamed their answer to the moonlight and it looked new and well built.

"Funny," said Mack suddenly as Corey cut the motor and they began to drift in with their momentum. "There are no boats."

"There never are," said the fisherman cryptically. Elspeth and Mack exchanged glances across the cockpit. But there seemed nothing to say, nothing to ask. They would soon be close to the source of all knowledge about Spindrift Key.

Elspeth shivered a little although the night was warm. She tried to tell herself that it was just fatigue rippling her muscles. But within herself she knew different. Corey's talk about the island might be the cause—but she felt a definite fear. She couldn't have said what she feared. None the less she was afraid.

Their bow bumped the dock then—a prosaic sound. Corey scrambled onto the dock and made fast the painter. Then he helped Elspeth ashore and she shook down her travel-rumpled tweed skirt while Mack, nursing his camera, climbed up beside them.

"Which way—ah!" said Mack, nodding toward a neat path which began a hedge-lined progress inland at the far end of the dock.

"That'll take you to the house," said Corey, who was engaged in stuffing his pipe. "Got nowhere else to go."

He chuckled at his own joke and Elspeth sighed. They thanked their Charon dutifully and began to walk slowly up the path. It headed straight toward a large landscaped clump of some sort of shrubbery, indistinguishable in the night, fifty yards from the dock. There it took a right-angle turn to the left.

And there the darkness struck them. It came without sound, without motion, without warning. One moment Elspeth was looking ahead in the moonlit blue and gold of the evening—the next she was in a world without light, without stars, without moonlight.

She cried out in alarm and it seemed to her that she was surrounded by an airlessness that must mean asphyxiation. Instinctively she stretched out an arm to where she remembered Mack was, drew reassurance from the feel of his jacket.

"Mack," she whispered, for somehow it seemed wrong to speak normally in the blackness. "Mack, what is it?"

"I dunno," he replied, his strong fingers finding hers and drawing her into the circle of his arm. "But it would make one wonderful dark-room."

It would have been more reassuring if his voice hadn't trembled ever so slightly on the final syllable.

II

IT WAS, she thought, like being inside a globe filled with nothing. Even the ground beneath her feet seemed not to be. Mack Fraser's arm and body were the only tangibles—and for once she was of no disposition to sneer at tangibles. She missed them.

"What do you think, Mack?" she asked him and her voice sounded small and uneven and a long way back from her lips.

"I'm not thinking," said Mack. "I'm only waiting."

How long they stood there in blackness Elspeth could not tell. Without being able to see anything or to hear anything beyond the noises they made themselves it was impossible to judge anything. There was a bitter gathering coldness that made her shiver and cling more closely to her companion. She didn't know what good muscles could be in such surroundings, but she was suddenly and overwhelmingly glad that Mack was a strong man.

"Put your watch to your ear," she whispered. "You can tell from its ticks how long this is lasting."

"What good will that do?" Mack countered, but she felt the shift of his

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weight as he lifted his left hand. Then, after a moment, he said, "That's funny. It seems to have stopped."

"Oh, fine!" said Elspeth. At least the failure of Mack's wristwatch was something on which to take out the frustration that had taken hold of her. She didn't want to take it out on Mack—not just then. He might get angry and step away from her. She could not bear the thought of being alone in this black—nothingness.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the darkness was gone. They could see the path, leading exactly as before to the big white house with its white pillars atop the gentle rise of Spindrift Key's one gentle hill. Below them the gravel of the path made scuffling noises under their feet. Above were the stars.

Acting from an inner urgency she did not at the moment understand, Elspeth studied them. They were as they had been before they—went out. The Big Dipper hung in the same spot and the neatly spaced jewels in Orion's belt had not slipped a notch.

"It's just the same," she said. She became aware of the fact that she was still glued closely to Mack's side, that his right arm was still holding her tightly. She said, "Well, *really!*" and disengaged herself with gentle firmness.

He looked down at her for a moment. She was a tall girl, a good five nine, and tall people had never bothered her before. But she had resented Mack's height ever since they had been thrown together for this assignment by Orrin Lewis in Manhattan more than three days before. She disliked the idea of looking up to him.

"Very well," he said and his voice was as unreadable as the darkness that had surrounded them moments before. "We might as well go on to the house."

He strode off and Elspeth was forced to hurry without dignity to keep up with him. She cursed him silently for a heel. Damn him, he knew she would not dare get far from him lest the darkness return again. She wished, not for the first time, that she were the sort of conniving wench who instinctively made certain that all available men were willing to serve her.

She had the looks when she chose to do something about them. Most female poets, she thought, were creatures of surpassing ugliness. Perhaps that was why they were poets. Aware of their inability to arouse masculine passion they turned to verse as a sublimation.

There had been a few who were otherwise, of course. Elinor Wylie was one. And perhaps Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for all that her father's twisted pathology and her ill-health had hardly given her capacity for arousing passion. And Sappho—but then, what did anyone at this late date actually know about Sappho?

"Hey! Watch yourself." One of Mack's long arms reached out and grabbed her. She had been on the point of blundering into the perfectly clipped boxwood hedge at the right of the path.

[*Turn page*]

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Mack said, "Do these things happen to you often?"

"Shut up," she told him. "I hate back-seat drivers."

"Some drivers need them—to stay out of ditches—or even on a path," he reminded her bluntly. She concentrated on keeping up.

The path widened in front of the house whose pillars rose at least twenty-five feet in simple square serenity, colonading a wide portico beyond which french windows gleamed in rectangular softness though the petticoats of their drapes. The lines of the house itself, enhanced by the dimness of the night, were even better proportioned at close hand than when seen at a distance.

"It's lovely," breathed Elspeth, looking up at it.

The large front door was opened slowly and a girl came out. Her features, cut sharply in relief by the light from the windows on either side of her, were as arresting to Elspeth as her figure, equally well revealed, was to Mack. Elspeth heard the quickening of his breath but forgot to be disgusted in her absorption.

"Miss Marriner—Mr. Fraser?" the girl said. Her voice, without alien accent, was softly contralto. It sounded as if its owner had mastery of many tongues. She smiled and said, "We're very glad you're here. Won't you come inside?"

"Thanks—thanks very much," said Elspeth when Mack seemed too dumfounded to reply. They entered a long high-ceiled hall that seemed to extend to the rear of the house. Three quarters of the way back a circular staircase of white with a dark mahogany rail, seemed to rise in graceful contempt for the law of gravity.

SOFT Persian carpet covered much but not all of the fine parquet. Light sparkled from a crystal chandelier that hung from the ceiling fifteen feet above. Dado and high wall paneling bespoke the tastes of a century twice gone; and a pair of authentic looking old portaits in simple gold frames were the only other decoration. Chairs and tables were mahogany—old and beautiful.

Seen in full light, the girl who had greeted them was breath-taking. Her hair, which hung in loose, soft waves to her shoulders, might have matched the deep red glow of the mahogany. Her figure, though it was not tall, was perfectly proportioned—a fact which the sleeveless white silk shirt, parted to the waistline, burgundy shorts and espadrilles did nothing to conceal.

Yet for some reason such informality, in this instance, did not clash with her surroundings. The old house was meant to be lived in—lived in by folk of charm, beauty and dignity. The girl had all three. Yes, there was dignity in the face framed by the mahogany hair—dignity and a sort of timeless poise that was startling in one who looked so very young.

"I'll take you to Mr. Horelle," she said softly, leading the way through a door to the right which took them into a library whose whiteoak wainscoting, unstained but polished with loving care for generations, had assumed the patina of a treasured meerschaum pipe. "He is very anxious to talk to you."

"About what?" asked Mack, Ever, thought Elspeth, the diplomat. Good old Mack. When bigger feet were made to crash through more fragile greenhouses, Mack would be their owner. But the girl in burgundy shorts seemed amused. There were quick little lights in her oddly shaded hazel eyes as she looked quickly at the photographer.

"Mr. Horelle will tell you that," she said demurely.

Briefly Elspeth wondered why it was that so many women—some of them creatures of undoubted intelligence, beauty and breeding—seemed to find quick response within themselves to men like Mack. It was a refutal of every principle of civilization, it was brutalizing, it was the crudest sort of masochism.

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They went through another doorway with a flat-curved arch and Elspeth stopped thinking about it. They were obviously in a sort of den or study at one end of the big house. It was an exquisite room—yet a comfortable one. Light hand-tooled leather with Florentine gilt-work at its edges was inset in the vast satinwood desk. A huge globe rose behind it in a window embrasure to the left—and in a like embrasure to the right was a celestial orb.

Directly above and behind the desk, which dominated the room, a large portrait hung against the wall. It was old—obviously, by the scarlet hues of its shadows and its ivory blacks, a Gilbert Stuart. It was of a surpassingly lovely woman in white, a woman in the neo-classic gown and ringlets of the early nineteenth century, a woman who was puzzlingly, hauntingly familiar to Elspeth.

"Don't you recognize her?" The gentle voice of the man who sat in the chair behind the big desk brought her out of her abstraction. She looked at him and saw that he was old and beautiful—beautiful as the saints are beautiful—and very wise. The whiteness of his skin and hair, the blue of his eyelids and the veins of his temples and the backs of his hands made Elspeth think of one thing and one thing only—alabaster.

"It is a failing of great age," he told her, and she wondered whether he were telepathic or whether she had spoken her thought aloud. But the charm of his faint smile eased her embarrassment. It was obvious that here was a very great man.

"Our skin grows thin, our blood sluggish," he went on and made a gesture of deprecation. "The effect of alabaster is not uncommon. But enough of myself. I believe Juana has told you by this time that I am anxious to talk with you, Miss Marriner and Mr. Fraser. Won't you sit down—and by all means smoke if you wish?"

His gracious manners put them both at their ease in the large room.

THEY sat in old leather armchairs that embraced them with the softness of clouds. Juana found a perch on a red-and-white leather hassock, where she drew one slim tanned leg up beneath her. Dammit, Juana thought, the child *was* beautiful—if she were a child. There was a timelessness behind her perfect poise.

"You are Mr. Horelle?" Mack asked bluntly. "May I ask how you knew our names?"

"It is hardly a mystery," said their host, again with his faint wise smile. "I was informed that you would almost certainly find your way here. If you had not—" he paused, gestured with one thin hand—" there would have been others. But perhaps not in time."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Mack, puzzled.

"I shall try to explain," said Mr. Horelle. "But first I must ask you to listen with open minds. For by this time you must know that Spindrift Key is not exactly what it seems."

"So we just learned over on the mainland," said Mack. He lit a cigarette and regarded Mr. Horelle with anticipation.

"I judge you have lived here for many years," said Elspeth, seeking to put in a dash of tact. "This house—the island—they are like a well thumb in these surroundings. They show the taste of secure generations, the loving care of someone—" She bogged down and felt herself blushing. Mack was regarding her as if she were an utter idiot but Mr. Horelle merely nodded his thanks.

"If I told you how many years I have lived here you would not believe me," he said quietly. "Suffice it to say that it has been a very long time. There were others before me—ever since Spindrift Key became a tangential point."

"What's that?" Mack asked aggressively, suspiciously.

"I'm the one who is to write the story," Elspeth reminded him. "You're here to take pictures. Let me ask the questions."

"It's a very good question," said Mr.

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Horelle. "Let me state first that Spindrift Key *is* a tangential point. I don't suppose either of you knows much about the tangency of time—or parallel time-tracks, if you wish."

Elspeth glanced covertly at Mack and was pleased to notice that he looked baffled. She turned eagerly to Mr. Horelle and said, "But I know a little. It's a theory that whenever an important decision in world history is made the world goes both ways with different subsequent histories. Oh damn! That doesn't sound very clear but it's the best I can do."

"Tommyrot!" said Mack rudely.

"On the contrary," said Mr. Horelle, "it is absolutely true. Hold on." He held up a hand as protests bubbled up behind Mack Fraser's lips. "I know what you are going to say. But it takes a great deal more than a petty personal decision to split the space-time continuum in which our universe exists.

"A nova, the destruction of a planet, even the momentous man-made events that affect the history of this minor speck of space-dust we call Earth—these things leave their marks in varying degrees. For a while after they occur—the time span varies according to the severity of the shock to the continuum—a tangential zone remains through which, to those who know the key, it is possible to affect a transfer between worlds."

"But what has happened here in this forsaken place?" Mack inquired, unable to restrain himself longer.

"Spindrift Key is thrice tangential," said Mr. Horelle gently but with an undertone of quiet assurance that could not be denied. "Almost four centuries ago an Englishman named Raleigh put inside the Capes on his return to England after founding a colony at Roanoke. He decided that this island and the mainland behind it offered a more favorable site for his colony. He planned to move it here before returning home."

"And—?" said Elspeth, fascinated in spite of herself.

"In one world he did so and the entire history of this continent was altered," said Mr. Horelle. "In that you come from conditions arose which caused him to postpone making the move."

A BUTLER with a face like a kindly hound dog appeared silently and put a tray of bottles, ices, glasses and soda on an ancient cherry table against one side wall. For a brief spell the talk was light and general. Then Mr. Horelle resumed his talk.

"In January of 1813 the American privateer *Patriot*, Captain Overstocks commanding, was wrecked by the so-called Bankers or pirates who made a business of decoying ships on the shoals. She was running the British blockade off the Capes with a safe-conduct arranged between Governor James Alston of South Carolina, bound for New York."

"Alston . . ." said Elspeth. She looked again at the portrait and recognized it as that of Theodosia Burr, only daughter of Aaron Burr and wife of James Alston. "Of course," she said and her eyes grew bright. "Then that's one of the things from the *Patriot*."

Mr. Horelle smiled faintly, looking more like an alabaster saint than ever in the soft lighting. "I regret to say it qualifies as pirate loot," he told them. "Many things in this house do. My ancestors, some of them—" He made a deprecatory gesture.

"I'd like to take a shot of it," said Mack alertly. He looked happier now that he was back on ground that he could understand. But their host's next words put the furrow back on his brow.

"Actually Alston was able to obtain the safe-conduct because he and Burr were both trafficking with the British. There was an uprising planned both in the South and in New England which would have changed the entire course of history. In your world, the shipwreck prevented it. In others—" He let his voice fade briefly.

Then, leaning forward, "And more

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recently, when a pair of brothers named Wright were experimenting with heavier-than-air craft at near-by Kittyhawk they made many of their crucial plans in this very room. I think you can compute the potentialities of that.

"So Spindrift Island is a strong tangential point. It is, actually, a multiple gateway, its older tangencies maintained by the importance of more recent events. I trust you understand."

"Everything," said Mack bluntly, "except what it has to do with us."

"Everything," said Mr. Horelle in turn. His smile returned. "You have been selected, both of you, to carry out an extremely delicate and difficult assignment between worlds."

"I'm getting out of here right now," said Mack, rising.

"I very much fear you may find it difficult," said their host. "You see, when you stepped ashore a transfer was effected. You may have noticed some—odd phenomena."

"The darkness," said Elspeth. She felt a rushing return of her fear. All at once the old room, the old man, the lovely girl, ceased to be decorative, friendly and interesting. She felt as if she had been dropped suddenly into a chamber of horrors.

"You mean we're not on the same world we started out on?" said Mack, rising. "Buncombe! I'm going back to Corey and the pier. Come on, Elspeth, let's get started. Thanks for the drinks and the story. Mr. Horelle, but it has a ring of roquefort to me."

"I fear you may find some changes made," said their host drily, ignoring the insult. "Perhaps Miss Marriner will await your return here. I'll discuss your assignment more fully when you get back. Juana—see that Mr. Fraser doesn't get lost."

Mack looked first at Elspeth, who had not risen. She was definitely interested and cared not a fig whether the story were true or not. A story was a story and this was a gorgeous one that stirred her poetic soul. Besides, she had no intention of spending another night on a corn-husk lodging house mattress.

"I'll go alone, thanks," said Mack bitterly but Juana, soft and far more appealing than a kitten, moved close to him, and Elspeth could see his defenses crumble.

"It might interest you to know," said Mr. Horelle with his smile of quiet amusement, "that Juana herself is from another world than your own."

Mack looked her up and down and grinned crookedly. "If they are all cut from your stencil, Juana, show me the way. In the meantime I'll settle for you in the here and now."

To Elspeth's annoyance the gentle Juana did not bridle at Mack's vulgarity. Rather she seemed to enjoy it. She laughed and took his arm and, as they passed through the arch into the library said, "Remember, Mr. Fraser, I'm really out of this world."

"Just call me Mack, honey," said the photographer. Elspeth, still sitting in her chair, felt disturbed beyond all reason. Somewhere, deep within herself, she wished she were small and lissome and darkly beautiful instead of tall and too fair and with straight light hair so fine that it was always blowing out of shape.

"If you will give an old man some time," said Mr. Horelle, "I should like to explain to you certain elements of your assignment. I think you will find it important."

"By all means," said Elspeth, bringing herself back with a wrench from Mack and Juana.

"It is always a trifle startling at first," said Mr. Horelle gently, "but there are a certain number of us—a very small number by the way—whose job it is to watch these tangential points. We call ourselves—without much originality—the Watchers. Thanks to the fact that natural cataclysms have a great deal to do with the actuality of tangency only a few of the points are habitable."

"But what do you do?" said Elspeth.

"In effect," Mr. Horelle told her, "we

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try to look after the health of all the shapes and forms of Earth."

III

"SO YOU'RE awake," said Elspeth acidly as Mack stirred and groaned in the seat beside her. She had been driving the Pipit for a couple of hours now and they were approaching the border of South Carolina. The sun was still an hour shy of the meridian.

Mack opened one bloodshot eye and regarded her balefully. "Can't you run this thing more smoothly?" he complained. "How's a man to get any sleep with you tap dancing on the brake?"

"If you hadn't done whatever you did with Juana last night, you'd be up to the mark today," she said, corrosively virtuous.

"It was worth it," said Mack and an infuriating sated tomcat grin spread over his somewhat battered features. He yawned and stretched without inhibition, sat up and lit himself a cigarette.

"I still think we're both bats," he said. He fumbled in the breast pocket of his jacket, produced a worn pigskin billfold and pulled a sheaf of bills from it, eyeing them dubiously. "I wonder if this stuff is any good," he murmured and squinted at it.

"It's good," said Elspeth. "I bought some fuel for the Pipit with it half an hour ago. The attendant thought you were dead."

"Okay," said Mack. "Suppose I take over for a stretch, since you've managed to keep us out of ditches, and you brief me for a while on what this is all about. I hope your poetic mind hasn't scrambled it too badly. I don't mind telling you I got a shock last night when I went outside and found the old boy wasn't kidding." He climbed out of the car as Elspeth pulled to a stop at the roadside and slid over to make room for him behind the wheel.

"You seemed to take a long time getting over it," said Elspeth maliciously. Despite the utter strangeness of recent events she was still full of annoyance at her companion.

"Past history," said Mack, getting the Pipit underway. "I wish we were allowed to fly this thing. We could make New Orleans in a couple of hours. But I suppose it's out."

"You suppose correctly, "said Elspeth.

"I also suppose we're both fired from *Picture Week* back in whatever world we really come from," said the photographer.

"Mr. Horelle said not," Elspeth told him. But she could not repress a tremor of worry. Life as a poet, before Orrin Lewis and *Picture Week*, had involved a number of substitutes for regular eating of varying degrees of unpleasantness.

"He seemed to think he's God," said Mack. "Lord, what a putrid highway! Well, how about giving me the info?"

"Very well," she replied. In spite of her desire to be as unpleasant as possible to Mack Fraser she was too aware of the importance of their new assignment to risk wrecking it through pique.

She organized her thoughts, trying to put in order the amazing things that had happened from the time they had been engulfed by the darkness on Spindrift Key. All at once she felt very small and very alien and, save for Mack, very alone in a strange world. She reminded herself of Mack's behavior the night before.

Intentionally or otherwise Mr. Horelle had been vague upon some points of the job ahead of them. "You have everything you need," he had said with a quiet assurance that swept away possible errors. "When the time comes you'll know what to do."

Apparently they were entering the affairs of this alien world as catalysts to solve a crisis which was threatening the entire North American continent in war. They were to proceed in the Pipit to New Orleans, where they were to make contact with the agents of an American rebel named Reed Weston, a former cabinet member who was heading a

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group of recalcitrants with headquarters somewhere in the rugged Ozark country.

"Weston's the man the country needs," Mr. Horelle had told her. "But if you can't reach him soon with the Pipit, it will be too late. To pull the country together the government in New Orleans is planning a war with the empire in Mexico. Weston must get the whip-hand and quickly. You two can do it with the Pipit.

"But you must keep it on the ground until you reach him. Once its abilities are known you will be lost. You see, in this world there are no airplanes, no flying machines but balloons. Scientific and industrial growth have been stifled in the name of autocracy."

It was hard going, readjusting to a world so different from her own. But she had managed to absorb most of it—she hoped. If not, it was now too late to go backward. She passed this on to Mack who listened intently, his eyes on the road, his brow furrowed.

"We'll have to watch our step, Elly," he said when she had finished. "And don't you get off on any tangents—Lord, that word again! I've been around a bit more than you have. Better let me make the contacts when we get there."

"You did all right last night," she said, thinking of Juana and how unfair it was that one girl should have so many devastating weapons in her arsenal. Mack ignored her and said nothing.

She wondered why he bothered her so. It wasn't love—not with a crude ex-pug who went roaring off after everything in skirts, shorts or slacks, who beamed an eye in his direction. She resented the fact that she was thinking of him so much of the time, decided that the long-fabled dangers of propinquity were a trifle too real. Something would have to be done about that. She felt grimy with the dirt from the plowed fields and tobacco plantations that lined the road at intervals. She felt unwanted.

[*Turn page*]

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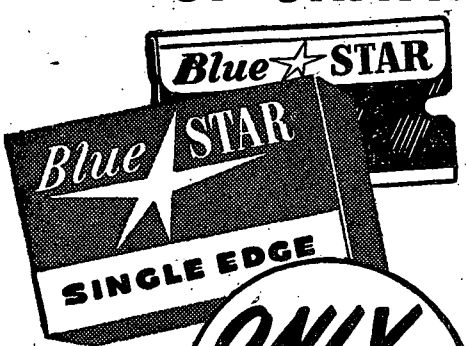

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Thanks to her long session with Mr. Horelle, Elspeth had not been especially startled by the discoveries of the morning. The gleaming white-shell causeway to the mainland that had overnight replaced the water route by which Corey had brought them to Spindrift Key, the sight of the Pipit, repaired and washed and ready to take them on their journey, the changes in the little town.

THERE were differences, also, in the country through which they rode while the sun rose higher and passed its zenith. Fewer towns dotted the terrain and the road itself was a high-crowned, single-lane affair which would barely have qualified as a third-class road in their own world.

Moreover they passed an average of four cars every twenty miles, save in the larger communities. And not once was the skyline broken by the towers of a high-tension line, not once did a silver transport plane gleam in the light blue sky as it wheeled slowly overhead. People were shabbier for the most part, and for every prosperous looking mansion or farmhouse they passed there were scores of decrepit-looking hovels, mostly inhabited by large Negro families, whose visible members regarded the Pipit with sullen disinterest.

They lunched in a strangely archaic public house in Spartanburg, noting with some surprise the portrait of President Wilkinson, a languid and somewhat hollow-cheeked citizen, upon the wall. The food was plentiful and surprisingly cheap but the mutton which was the main dish was almost inedibly high in flavor.

"No air travel, no refrigeration," said Mack sourly, pushing away his plate. "I'd like to take the Pipit up and scare the whey out of some of these cretins." Then he brightened up as the waitress, a comely chubby brunette of perhaps nineteen summers and but one aim in life, ogled him as she poured a bottle of wine out into remarkably fine crystal glasses.

"Relax, mate," said Elspeth when the girl had departed with a provocative flirt of her apron strings. "We have a long way to go yet if we're to reach Atlanta tonight."

"Yes, teacher," said Mack. When he paid the bill he seemed pleasantly surprised that the money Mr. Horelle had given them was good. "This," he told Elspeth, "is a very soft snap."

"So far," said Elspeth, keeping her finger crossed. To date they had seen no symptoms of conflict brewing—no uniforms, no marching troops, no air of tension.

They reached a strangely altered Atlanta, a small city of no tall buildings but one of wide ill-tended parks, at dusk. Elspeth was tired and bedraggled and was glad to settle for an inside room at an old American-plan hotel, which seemed to be the best the town had to offer.

For a change the food was both good and plentiful and was served with deftness by polite colored waiters. There was tension in the air about them, tension that was to increase geometrically with their arithmetical nearness to the capital, New Orleans.

A large-necked and expensively-dressed man, seated with two over-ornate females of uncertain age at the next table, regaled his companions throughout the entire meal with a vicious diatribe against "that limb of Satan, Reed Weston, and his rotten subversive group of anarchists."

Weston, he claimed, was not only undermining the proper government as duly elected, was not only threatening to destroy all Columbian civilization with his anarchic ideas, but was proving himself a traitor as well now that the country was facing war.

There was more, much more, but it was in the same vein and repeated over and over again. Mack wagged his head in mock exasperation, causing one of the women at the next table to smile faintly at him. But she did not look at him again. Perhaps, Elspeth thought,

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because the fat man continued to pour his women champagne.

"Champagne and bulging vests," she thought. There was the germ of a poem in it, she decided. She drifted off, seeking the phrase, the form, the rhythm that would give it clarity, mood and bite. Which, she wondered, was sadder—the drab whose insensate craving for the gay life could be assuaged only through letting herself be pawed by such a gross and loathesome creature—or the fat man, ignorant of love save that which his money could buy?

"Come out of it, Ellie," said Mack, shattering the pleasant lilac sadness of her mood. "We'd better turn in if we're going to get an early start tomorrow morning."

"Look who's talking," said Elspeth. But she went along to her room meekly enough. She was too worn out, physically, nervously and emotionally, to let even Mack irritate her further. She almost fell asleep in the weird wood-and-copper horror that passed as a bathtub.

SHE was roused at six the next morning from the desk downstairs by a whistling voice that emerged from a speaking tube arrangement close to the head of her bed. This was, apparently, a world without telephones, though she had noticed what looked like a telegraph desk of some kind in the lobby the night before.

She was considerably pleased on getting downstairs to discover that Mack was not in the dining room, where an alert young Negro was serving breakfast to early risers. But he informed her courteously that Mr. Fraser had already eaten and was waiting for her in the garage across the street.

She limited herself to toast and coffee, paid the check and joined the photographer. He was studying a large six-wheeled vehicle parked next to the Pipit, acknowledged Elspeth's arrival with a nod and said, "Get a load of this buggy. Looks like a dinosaur."

"It's big, that's all," she said, puzzled at his interest.

For her comment she received a long technical lecture. It was as different from the Pipit as day from night. Mack lifted a hood that swung oddly on a pivot, showed her an engine that looked to Elspeth like any other engine. "The blessed thing runs on ammonia," he told her. "Didn't you notice the way any of the cars we saw on the road yesterday looked?"

"Unh-unh," she said, shaking her head. "But look—the Pipit has new plates." She stared at them in surprise.

"We wouldn't have got far yesterday without them," Mack told her contemptuously. "Get in. We're going to make a try for Baton Rouge. We can eat lunch in Selma."

Feeling like an ignoramus, Elspeth obeyed. Not until they were well beyond Atlanta did she straighten from a slumped position in the seat and utter the word, "Teeth."

"What's that?" Mack asked her, his eyes on the road.

"Teeth, teeth, *teeth*!" she told him. "Didn't *you* notice?"

"Notice what?" He seemed honestly puzzled, risked a quick glance at her as if to reassure himself of her sanity.

"Look." She pulled from her handbag a small container like a pepper shaker with little holes under its hinged lid. "I found this in my alleged bathroom at the hotel. Apparently everyone uses the stuff here—it's got a government seal."

"So it's a monopoly," Mack told her with a shrug.

"Maybe, but have you noticed everybody's teeth—they're perfect. And we didn't see a dentist's sign in either Spartanburg or Atlanta. They may not have airplanes and telephones but they've found something to keep enamel from decaying."

"I take it all back—you *have* got eyes," Mack said graciously. She restrained an impulse to box his visible ear.

"This could be pretty valuable back in our own world," she said. "Apparent-

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ly they just pour some into water and rinse out their mouths with it. That's what the directions say to do."

As they drew close to Selma in the late morning they discovered that railroad tracks ran parallel with the road. They were the first Mack and Elspeth had seen in this strange new world. After a while they spotted the smoke from a train. It was a gaudy affair with an engine at the rear which, by its tail of smoke, appeared to be jet or rocket propelled. It was painted bright blue and the seven cars in front of it were arranged to form a rainbow spectrum, from red to purple. They were elaborate with much gilt and fretwork.

"She goes right along, doesn't she?" asked Elspeth, for which bit of amiability she received only a look of contempt.

Elspeth wondered why Mack despised her so. Perhaps, she thought, he merely despised all poets. He was a crass materialistic beast in many ways. Yet he could be as fussy about framing a photograph just so as any poet over selecting exactly the right word to fit into a couplet. He was, she decided, an iambic pentameter type. She studied the sweeping lawn of a great estate as it swept past and forgot about him in the emerald comfort of clipped sward.

THEY lunched as planned in Selma, with another picture of President Wilkinson on the wall. Inevitably their fare consisted chiefly of Southern-fried chicken, mashed potatoes and biscuits. When she had eaten all she wished Elspeth looked at Mack and sighed.

"Apparently a change in worlds does not change regional cooking," she said. "I'll wager this same fare is being served in five hundred thousand different Southern restaurants on five hundred different versions of Earth. It frightens me."

"It's probably a lot more frightening to the chickens," numbled Mack. He had been thoughtful and silent all morning. Now he added, "I don't like this job of ours at all."

"Afraid?" Elspeth asked him lightly. He shook his head.

"Not afraid—just cautious," he replied. "It's tough enough to play a three-cornered mess like the one we're getting into when you know the local angles. We're hitting this one mighty cold. We could make a fatal misstep and never know we'd done it."

"Look at the map," said Elspeth, nodding toward the wall opposite that on which President Wilkinson hung. It showed a North America utterly different from that of their own world.

The United States, renamed the Columbian Republic, stretched from Maine to Key West as before. Evidently, however, the Oregon controversy of a century earlier had gone against the Columbian Republic, for the Columbia River marked the border in the northwest. And while Texas was intact to the Rio Grande, most of the Southwest —Arizona, New Mexico, part of Nevada and the southern portion of California —belonged to a Mexican Empire that extended all the way to the Isthmus of Panama.

"Wonder how that Mexican Empire thing got started," said Mack. "Wonder how this became the Columbian Republic."

"Parallel time tracks," said Elspeth sweetly. "Things went differently way back when. Do you believe it now?"

"I'll have to until I wake up," he growled. She judged that the experience of adjusting to a tangential universe was proving a strain on his sense of logic. For herself, she had long since given up trying to look ahead. It was better, in this instance, to take things as they came along—or so it seemed to her.

They drove on and on through the Deep South during the afternoon and early evening. They went through Meridian, Mississippi, not long after lunch, then headed southwest toward Baton Rouge over a road whose lack of excellence varied from township to township according to local whim and budget.

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Once they had to pull over almost into a swamp as a long military convoy passed them at high speed en route to the Mexican border. The big multi-wheeled vehicles were propelled by some jet drive similar to that of the train, with outtake vents flaring fiercely along their sides. In the trucks were green-clad soldiers armed with odd-looking weapons.

"They may not have planes," said Mack thoughtfully, "but somebody's been seeing that they know how to kill on the ground. Some of those weapons look mighty tough."

"No matter what sort of civilization man rears he always sees to it that he has the tools to kill his own kind," Elspeth said with a dash of bitterness.

"If, he doesn't his civilization perishes," said Mack quietly. "It's a story as old as Rome—a lot older."

They drove on through gathering dusk until, within a few miles of Baton Rouge, they were stopped by a light being swung back and forth across the road in front of them. Mack pulled to a stop and a sun-tanned young officer in a pale blue uniform with silver insignia walked over to the car. A couple of helmeted soldiers moved up behind him.

"I'd like to see your papers," he said. "We're checking at the river for rebels. A lot of them are trying to get to Weston."

The papers with which Mr. Horelle had equipped them were in order, and Mack mopped sweat from his brow as the officer stood back and motioned them to proceed. "That's a neat looking car you have, Mr. Fraser," he said. "Is it foreign?"

"English," said Mack. "They make the best."

"Wish we had their know how," said the officer sadly.

As they drove on Mack was even more thoughtful than before. Finally he asked, "Did you notice the guns those soldiers were carrying? They looked to me like some sort of machine-rockets. And our friend's pistol—unless I'm crazy that's a rocket job too. Funny they haven't learned to fly."

IV

BATON ROUGE was a surprise. Instead of the sleepy little river city of their own world they found themselves driving into a metropolis far larger than the down-at-heel Atlanta in which they had slept the night before. The buildings were not tall but they were many, large and frequently magnificent.

"It's like an immense garden party with Japanese lanterns!" exclaimed Elspeth, her fatigue fading as they moved slowly amid bizarre traffic along a broad two-lane avenue. In the parklike center of the road trees tossed up fantastic silhouettes against the looping strings of lights that provided much of the illumination.

Forty-foot-wide sidewalks flanked it after the fashion of the Champs Elysées in Paris; and great houses, palaces and gardens lay beyond them on either side, many of them brightly lit. Baton Rouge was evidently one of the great cities of the Columbian Republic. Elspeth felt a quick inner response to its drama and beauty.

"It's mighty well guarded," observed Mack, his eyes taken by the vari-colored uniforms of police and military that flashed brilliantly amid more somber male civilian costume and the gay dresses of strolling women.

"But it's so gay—so Continental!" Elspeth said.

"Let's get to the best hotel we can find," replied the practical Mack. "*If* we can get a room. This town looks full."

He was right. After three dismal tries they finally obtained lodging at what was evidently the city's supreme hotel, Bienville House. Elspeth felt like a hollow-eyed ruin as she surveyed the splendors of the lobby while Mack signed the register.

"Tropical lushness," she told herself as she studied the opulent drapes that

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framed round-arched, two story windows and tried not to notice the magnificent features, figures and grooming of the women who paraded past, most of them on the arms of slim-waisted young officers in vari-colored uniforms or well-fed civilians in evening attire almost as colorful.

"We are most happy to be able to accommodate you," said the room clerk, a black-browed individual with a charming smile. "It is only by sheerest chance—"

"That's fine," said Mack curtly. He eyed Elspeth oddly, a bit grimly, as they followed a golden-haired bellboy to an ornate lift. But she failed to register this as an immensely tall gray-haired officer, stunningly handsome in blue, scarlet and gold and literally spangled with gold lace and medals, entered the lift after them. Her fingers tightened on his arm.

The general or marshal, or whatever he was, was virtually coal black of skin. For once even Mack was startled—perhaps as much by the deference the white liftman and bellboy showed him as by the fact that this man of obviously high rank was a Negro. He smiled at Elspeth, then at Mack, as the lift rose slowly.

"You must have traveled a long way," he offered in a deep and beautifully soft voice.

"Oh dear, do we look *that* terrible!" exclaimed Elspeth. Mack, for once, was too stunned to speak. The ebon general smiled again.

"If you did, I should scarcely have remarked upon it," he said with a courtesy that warmed the poet. Before she could shovel up a reply the lift stopped and he got out. But at the door he said, "I hope you enjoy your stay with us."

They got out a floor higher up—the fourth and, as she discovered later, the top story of the hotel. As the bellboy put down their two suitcases to unlock a high white-paneled door, Mack asked, "Who was that—back in the lift?"

"You don't know Marshal Henry?" The boy seemed astonished. "He's here to see President Wilkinson—about this Reed Weston business. He's our Chief of Staff."

"He's a very charming gentleman," said Elspeth.

"And a very good tipper," said the boy, opening the door. Elspeth entered first, took in at a glance the high ceiled expanse of the chamber, and crossed its soft carpet to fling open one of three french windows that opened on a wrought-iron balcony. The leaves of a palm tree unfolded before her and beyond and below she could see the flashing loops of the lights along the great avenue.

"Magic lantern city," she thought, or would "goblin city" be better? She sought to catch some phrase that would convey in cold letters the warmth and magic around them, the softness of the air, the fragrance of its millions of blossoms.

After a while she turned back to the room, feeling as if she were at least six inches off the floor and floating, floating.

SHE was jarred back to earth quickly by the sight of Mack—his coat off, his tie pulled loose, his shirt half unbuttoned—stretched out in one of the huge room's several easy chairs. He blew cigarette smoke lazily at the ceiling as she entered.

"Don't detonate," he told her. "It's the only decent room in the city. I had to tell them we were—er—together to get it. Apparently the marriage rules are a bit lax in this world. That clerk downstairs told me it didn't matter before I could lie about us and say we were."

Her eyes ranged quickly to his suitcase, already open on a stand beside hers near the door, to the luxurious bathroom half exposed to her right, to the immense platform bed whose four posts rose with slim dignity, pointing toward the ornate plaster pattern of the ceiling above them. He followed her gaze.

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"Cherubs," he said, looking up at them. "Cute—what?"

"Mack Fraser," she began, "if you think for a moment that I'm going to go to—"

"Relax, my iron virgin," he told her blandly. "You can sleep on the couch if you spurn my company. Perhaps, if you snore, it might be better that way."

"*Oooh!*" said Elspeth, unable to find verbal expression for once in her life. Mack just lay back in the chair and grinned at her evilly, enjoying her discomfiture.

Suddenly, overcome with fatigue, with the emotional and nervous strains of the past few days, Elspeth collapsed on the floor and burst into tears. She was dimly conscious of Mack, swearing but concerned, rising quickly and coming over to her. Crying released the tension and made her feel better inside, but her head felt stuffy and she knew her nose was red.

"Very well," he said gruffly, bending to get his hands beneath her shoulders and pull her to her feet. He held her to him briefly and gave her back an awkward pat as she laid her head against his shoulder. "I was only fooling—except about the fact that this *is* the only room in the city."

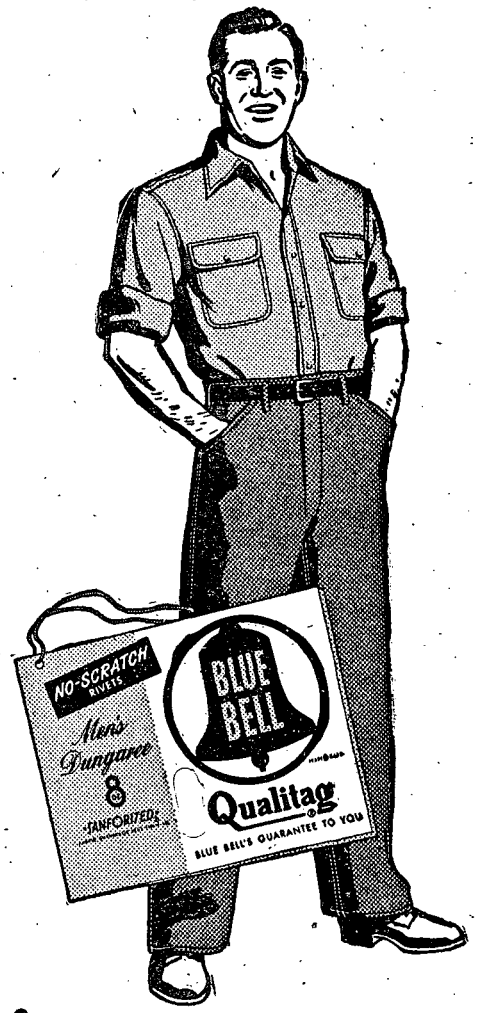
"But what are we going to do?" she sniffed, wishing for the moment that she were dead. Now Mack would really have something on her. He stood away from her, thrust a handkerchief under her nose.

"Blow," he told her. Then, when she had complied, "It's not that bad. Grab a robe and take a bath and you'll feel better. I'll go downstairs and see if I can't find some books that will give us some information on this world we're in. When you get through bathing, I'll take one. Then let's do some boning. And don't worry—I'll sleep on the couch. I planned to anyway."

"You're so kind and I'm so simply stinking," she heard herself say unexpectedly. She stifled another burst of

[*Turn page*]

How to buy better work clothes



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sobs, managed a teary smile. "All right, Mack," she said meekly.

"That's better," he told her, releasing her and moving toward the door. "You won't be stinking after you bathe."

"You star-faced mole!" she snapped at him. He was laughing softly as he closed the door behind him.

After thinking things over briefly, Elspeth took his advice. The warm water of the immense sunken tub washed away her travel dirt and most of her tension and left only a comfortable glow. When she emerged, Mack was already back. He waved toward a portable table adorned with bottles, ice and glasses.

"Help yourself," he told her. "It's my turn. And you might glance these over while I'm in the tub. We've got to do a lot of boning up in a hurry." He nodded toward the half dozen books and periodicals which lay piled on a straight chair near the door.

By the time Mack rejoined her, looking unexpectedly scrubbed and little-boyish, Elspeth, the barely-sipped drink in front of her forgotten, was already deep in concentration upon a brief popular history of Columbia, which he had found downstairs. He had to give her a shake before she became aware of him.

"Hey!" he said. "What have you found out?"

"Oh!" She looked at him blankly, returned to herself. "We have a terrible lot to learn," she said. She motioned vaguely at the other reading material he had brought to the room. "Better see what you can get out of those. I'll give you a précis of this. It's the same world as ours up to about 1814."

"Then old Horelle wasn't kidding," said Mack, picking up the other books and magazines and settling in a chair. He seemed, she thought, to have become at least temporarily adjusted to their transfer of worlds. It had taken concrete evidence of sorts. Mack was no one to let a mere idea convince him.

She delved back into the book. The differences in the past—and therefore in the present—were fascinating. It all hinged on the Burr-Wilkinson conspiracy, which had been renewed with belated success. In return for pulling the fledgling United States out of the war with England, the conspirators, abetted by Spaniards and Louisianians and New Englanders, had overthrown the Madison regime following Cockburn's burning of Washington, made peace with England and founded the Columbian Republic.

ELBA and Waterloo had come and gone while the conspirators—called Founding Fathers in the book—organized their new nation along the hierarchal lines of the ancient Venetian Republic—with the franchise limited to the few, slavery permitted and public office unofficially but actually a matter of inheritance and appointment rather than election. Wilkinsons, Alstons and the like were repeated in prominent posts generation by generation.

New Orleans was made the capital, for the new republic's attention was focused very much to the south rather than toward Europe. One of the conditions under which England had permitted its founding was that it use every influence to break up the Spanish grip on Latin America. Apparently, however, the British had not planned to have this accomplished as it had been.

In 1820, Mexico and South America had been ripe for revolt—largely incited by Columbian money and arms. Swift frigates of the Columbian Navy, under the command of Commodore Stephen Decatur, and flying the rebel Mexican flag, had raided St. Helena, had successfully brought off Napoleon and sailed with him to New Orleans.

By the time the British Government was aware of what had happened Napoleon was safely ensconced on a throne in the viceroy's palace in Mexico City and all Latin and South America were up in arms. With Austrian and Russian aid in Europe the more or less United

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Americas had been able to beat off the combined British and Spanish efforts to regain the lost territory.

The British had captured Boston and the Columbians had taken both Montreal and Quebec—cities which were returned when at last peace came in 1826. The Mexican Empire was firmly established as far south as the Panama Isthmus. South America itself was divided into one kingdom, Brazil, and the republics of Venezuela, Peru and Patagonia. These divisions still remained.

Columbia and Mexico, then under the rule of the former Duke of Reichstadt, had fought a brief war in 1841 over the disputed territory of Texas, with the Columbians winning handily, thanks largely to the genius of Generals Pillow and Quitman.

In 1850 the Russians, discovering gold close to their California settlement, had attempted to enlarge their holdings by conquest. Mexico and Columbia, along with the British in Canada, had quickly united to drive the minions of the czar from the Western Hemisphere and had divided up the territory among themselves.

Then had come peace until 1869, when the northeastern states, resentful of their waning role in the republic, attempted to secede. The contest had lasted six years and had all but finished Columbia. But the South, the Midwest—tied to the South by the Mississippi waterway and the greatness of New Orleans—and the Far West, had ultimately been able to prevail against the ten rebellious states—New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Ohio—following the decisive battle of Elmira.

Thoroughly whipped, the Northeast still played a secondary role in the nation, was famed for its summer resorts and its down-at-heel lost-causism rather than for its heavy industry. Columbia and Mexico had sent a combined expeditionary force to Europe to abet the French in the first war of the West against the union of Turko-Austro-Prussian forces which threatened to overrun the continent. With the help of Russia they had finally been victorious in 1906.

The second World War had been against Russia, whose czar had sought to destroy the Ottoman Empire and gain a Mediterranean Sea outlet. But the others had turned on him and driven his Russian forces back. Since then the world had been living in uneasy peace.

Internal troubles in Columbia were serious, Elspeth discovered, despite the legitimist tone of the book she was reading. The slavery problem had settled itself. Compelled by world opinion to enforce humanistic legislation on slave owners, the Columbian Republic had discovered them to be economically impossible. More and more slaves were freed as their support grew more expensive than paying wages to unindentured workers until, when at last slavery was abolished in 1901, passage of the bill had been a mere formality.

There was virtually no color line, save among the few oligarchial families that actually held the reins of power. Freed slaves for more than a century had been winning high places in government and society, had proved to be invaluable citizens, today held many key positions in business, the government and the professions.

BUT Columbia, thanks to its history and governmental setup, was too limited a republic to endure without trouble. And trouble it now had in the form of Reed Weston, a highly successful industrial inventor who had turned on the hand that fed him.

Frowning as she sought to read between the lines, Elspeth detected a profit motive in the revolt. Evidently invention and scientific progress—at least as far as their practical applications went—were strictly limited by the oligarchy.

This, she thought, would account for the poor roads, the few cars, the lack of planes, the amazing weapons of the mili-

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tary they had seen. The rulers of Columbia were not permitting the enrichment of their masses through large-scale cheap production if such a thing were possible. But they were seeing to it that their defenders got the best in weapons and equipment.

Apparently this had been too much for Reed Weston to endure. He had attempted to push through legislation that would widen the scope of unlimited private enterprise. He had acquired a considerable following, not only in the still underdeveloped Northeast but in the heart of the republic itself.

When irrevocable presidential veto finally blocked his efforts he had basely resisted arrest and had fled, first to the Black Hills of South Dakota, then to Missouri, where his supporters had been slowly, secretly gathering around him.

His forces enlarged, he had moved into the Ozarks, thus becoming an open threat to the capital at New Orleans, and insisted that President Wilkinson either withdraw his veto or resign and permit the unthinkable—an election open to every man in Columbia, whether he owned property or not. It was, the book said, anarchy.

There was no talk of the impending trouble with Mexico but Mack, in his reading, had stumbled across some of that. After listening to Elspeth's summary, he told her about it.

"It's a grab like Texas," he said. "Southern California this time. A lot of Amer-Columbians have settled there and now Wilkinson and his gang are claiming they aren't getting fair treatment. It's my hunch Wilkinson and this black marshal of his are planning to kill two birds with one stone. They'll heat up the country for a war with Mexico, arm well and move in. Then, if this Weston doesn't join up, they'll be able to pin a traitor tag on him and make it stick. Frankly I wouldn't like to be in his shoes."

"That's our job, isn't it?" queried Elspeth. "To get him a new pair of shoes, I mean?"

"Yeah," said Mack, stretching and yawning. "I don't see why we have to go all the way down to New Orleans. It seems to me we ought to be able to contact him a lot more quickly from here."

"This is the play-city for Wilkinson and his friends," Elspeth told him. "I'll lay odds it's too tightly guarded and screened. It certainly is beautiful."

"Yeah," said Mack, yawning again. "Let's turn in."

Although it was late when they got to sleep, Elspeth was awakened early the following morning. Beneath her window the stillness was broken by men's shouts and the sounds of running feet.

She got up and went out on the balcony and looked down, tying the belt on her robe as she did so, pushing the hair back out of her eyes. Below, through the dark green palm fronds, she saw a pair of soldiers in lavender uniforms chasing a civilian, who was running desperately along the broad sidewalk.

"Stop, you scum!" shouted one of the soldiers, raising an oddly designed weapon to his shoulder. When the man failed to halt, the soldier pressed something. There was a backflash over his shoulder behind him, a flicker of intense heat in front of the flaring muzzle.

Where the running man had been there was nothing—nothing but, for a wavering instant, an impression of still-running disembodied shoes. Then they, too, were gone.

The other soldier, apparently a non-commissioned officer of some kind, looked angrily at his mate, then examined the place on the pavement where the running man had been and scuffed at a faint brown stain.

"What's the idea of burning him here?" he demanded, his voice crackling mad. "You know how the lieutenant is about these sidewalks. He'll have us—what is it?"

He looked around, following the other soldier's pointing finger, which was aimed directly at Elspeth on the balcony.

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INVOLUNTARILY Elspeth drew back. But there was no doubt about the purpose of the soldiers beneath. Horrified she sought to peer down at them from behind the shelter of palm fronds, saw one of them raising his dreadful weapon toward the balcony.

At that moment an officer appeared and struck down the disintegrator—if that was what it was—before it could be fired again. He cursed the soldier in low but violent tones. The man saluted, again pointed up at the balcony.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but she saw—"

"You muddle-headed idiot!" said the officer. "This is going to raise all kinds of a stink. I gave you men strict orders not to use your—"

She lost the rest of it but, without understanding why, got a definite impression that she had witnessed something unpardonable and that steps were going to be taken. Terrified, she ducked back inside the big room. Mack was sitting up, rubbing his eyes.

"What's going on?" he asked her, yawning. "I thought I heard some shouting outside."

She told him as rapidly as she could. She had just finished when the speaking tube by the big bed whistled its summons. Mack looked at her with raised eyebrows, then rose to answer it.

He gave terse answers to his unseen colloquist, then let the tube slip back into place and ran his fingers through his hair. "That was the desk," he told her, frowning. "You seem to have got us into some sort of a mess. A Captain Logan is waiting for you downstairs—he said something about a formality but I don't like it. I don't like any of this setup."

"But I haven't *done* anything," Elspeth protested.

Mack lit a cigarette, threw the pack to her as she sank onto the edge of the huge bed. "They're giving us fifteen minutes to get downstairs," he said. "I'm for getting out of here. We may be tied up for days—or longer—if we do report. Get dressed."

"But if they're waiting downstairs how are we—"

"I'm trying to figure out a way," said Mack quickly. "Get your duds on. And for the love of heaven don't go prudish now."

"Don't be a dastard," Elspeth told him, gathering the shreds of her ego about her and darting for the bathroom. By the time she emerged, five minutes later, Mack was already dressed and in the act of closing her suitcase.

"But we haven't a chance," said Elspeth. "You haven't seen these—these weapons of theirs in action."

"We took on a job, didn't we?" said Mack, poking a protruding bit of nightgown inside the edge of the bag without regard for wrinkles. "We took money, didn't we? We promised to make our contact in New Orleans today, didn't we? Come on."

[Turn page]

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He handed her one of the bags and pulled from his pocket a flat automatic pistol of whose presence amid his gear she had not had a previous suspicion. He caught her glance, said, "It's a good thing I have it," and opened the hall door cautiously.

Apparently it was against Bienville House rules to have soldiery patrolling the corridors for their exit was unguarded. But when they reached the elevators Mack said, *"Oh-oh!"* and drew her quickly past and into the shelter of a stair well beyond them.

They were barely concealed when the lift-light showed and its heavy metal grille clicked open. A pair of erect young men in civilian clothes moved away from them toward their room with purposeful strides in well-briefed silence.

"Are they after us?" said Elspeth, shuddering.

Mack nodded grimly. "I wonder," he said and his eyes lighted. "Come on, Elly." He moved as swiftly and silently as the plainclothesmen down wide marble stairs, Elspeth following and wishing her bag was not quite so heavy.

"Stick right behind me and keep your mouth shut," he ordered her crisply, peering along the corridor of the floor below their own. "I got a glimpse of this layout last night. If I'm right—and I'll give odds that I am—"

He moved swiftly to a door directly across from the elevators and knocked on it. Elspeth found herself admiring his ability to make quick decisions and act on them in an emergency, and disliked herself for her admiration. After all, Mack was little more than a well-trained male animal who could handle the trickeries of camera-focus competently. But could he write a sonnet or compose an original philosophic theorem? Could he paint a picture worth looking at or sculp a statue? Could he compose a—

"Snap out of it, Elly, for God's sake!" Mack's whisper was almost vicious. At that moment one of the big double doors at which he had knocked was opened a trifle. Without hesitation Mack pushed on in, holding his pistol against his side. With a jerk of his head he motioned Elspeth to follow and close the door. She did so, parking her bag carefully along his inside.

Only then did she look up—and gasp. Facing them, clad in underwear of pongee, was the towering figure of Marshal Henry, his black face gathered in a thunderous scowl as he lifted his hands slowly above his gray head.

"Sorry to be rough, sir," said Mack with unusual politeness. "My friend here had the bad luck to see some of your boys use a disintegrator or something on a fugitive in the courtyard just now. They want to detain us and we haven't got time."

THERE was a long pause. The huge chief of staff frowned into space, seemed to have some difficulty refocusing his attention on Mack and the pistol in his hand. "A disintegrator?" he said. "In the courtyard?" He looked at Elspeth. "Tell me what you saw."

She did so briefly and he nodded slowly, then said, "You have been exceedingly unfortunate, young lady. But, young man, just how do you think making entry at the point of a gun is going to help you out of your difficulties?"

"You're going to do that, Marshal," Mack said calmly. "You're going to take us out of this hotel to our car. So be a good chief of staff and pop into a pair of pants, won't you? I took a chance on their calling your plainclothes guards away to nab us and it paid off. But they'll be back in a little while. So I suggest you hurry."

Marshal Henry regarded Mack for another long moment, then permitted himself a faint smile and moved toward a dressing room, whose door stood open at the far side of the room. Mack kept close to him, very much on the alert for hidden weapons. But nothing happened as the chief of staff donned a magnificent blue-and-silver uniform on whose chest fluttered a vast number of ribbons.

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"I hope you don't expect to get away with this, young man," he said as they reached the door. "You're bound to be caught."

"We can and do," said Mack. "Shall we go?" He slipped the pistol into his pocket but held it so that it bore on the immensely tall marshal at all times. They rode down in the elevator in silence, to the evident perturbation of the operator.

There was surprisingly little delay. The guards in the lobby, including a knot of young officers, apparently were too overwhelmed by the sponsorship of the chief of staff to put any obstacles in their path. But they began to follow them slowly.

"Tell them to stand back," Mack whispered to Marshal Henry.

"Report to barracks for a weapons check," the huge negro told them with crisply quiet authority. There was no need for further orders until they reached the garage and Mack told the attendant to get the Pipit out for them. The chief of staff looked at their newly-washed car speculatively.

"You'll never make it," he told them briefly. "I shall have to raise an alarm at once if only to save my own reputation."

"Perhaps you'd better come with us," said Mack quietly.

Marshal Henry laughed unexpectedly. "My dear chap," he said, "then there would certainly be a hue and cry at once. No, you'll have to take your chances. I shall see you later."

His teeth flashed a brilliant white, and Elspeth half expetced him to make a break as Mack got into the driver's seat. But he stood there, still laughing like some great orangutang, until the motor purred and their tires cut gravel in the court in front of the garage.

"What are you going to—" Elspeth began, then gasped as a file of lavender uniforms appeared less than a hundred yards in front of them. They carried weapons that looked like the disintegrator Elspeth had observed.

"This!" said Mack, pulling the wing attachment on the dashboard. "It's no time to hold back, Horelle notwithstanding."

Even as he spoke the Pipit's wings, slotted neatly inside the top, slid into flying position. Feeling their tug, Mack pressed the superdrive button and the sturdy little vehicle leaped ahead with a new and powerful motor hum. They lifted and automatically the engine pan dropped to become a jet-vent.

THE soldiers were far behind and beneath before any of them had time to fire. Within a minute the entire city of Baton Rouge lay a mile below and seven or eight miles to their rear, its palaces and boulevards and gardens making a magic geometry beside the lazy curves of the great brown river.

"How are we going to make contact?" Elspeth asked. "Surely they must have some means of rapid communication. And we're bound to be spotted on our way."

"Since we've been forced to use the Pipit's wings we'll have time for a diversion," Mack replied. "We'll spot the arteries around New Orleans from the air and come in by road from some other direction. I have an idea we'll have time to make connections. Wonder why that disintegrator or whatever it was you saw has the wind up with all of them?"

"Did you notice—the marshal, too?" Elspeth asked him.

Mack nodded and put the Pipit above a fortuitous cloud bank directly in their path. "It bothered him. And it bothered the men you saw using it. Maybe it's some sort of outlaw weapon in this world. It sounds tough enough."

"Oh, it was," said Elspeth, shivering.

Through gaps in the clouds, as they sped south, she could see the immense development of the lower Mississippi in this exotic republic of Columbia. From Baton Rouge to the capitol itself was almost one huge city, interspersed only rarely with signs of rural roominess.

They flew, high and all but silently,

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above New Orleans and noted its immense sprawling expanse. The clouds sheltered them at frequent intervals but Mack expressed little fear of being spotted from the ground at an altitude of two miles in a planeless world.

HE WENT on to the south and Elspeth, feeling reaction from the high adventure of the early morning, relaxed and studied the puffs of cloud beneath them and the birdlike shadows they cast on the checkerboard that was the Earth still further below.

There was heavy ocean travel through the delta and on the gulf. Some of the ships were steamers but the larger ones, like the train and the trucks they had seen, were double-hulled rocket affairs that seemed to cover the water at extremely high speed.

"Funny they can't fly," Mack mused. "They've got plenty of other up-to-the-minute gadgets in this world."

"Perhaps they never thought of it," said Elspeth vaguely. Then, "I'm hungry, Mack. We haven't eaten a real meal since yesterday noon. Where are you bringing us down?"

"North of Pontchartrain," said Mack. "There's some pretty open country up that way with a number of narrow roads. We ought to be able to sneak into New Orleans that way."

As it turned out they made it successfully. They paused for lunch at a sort of roadhouse and for once were spared the routine fried-chicken-and-grits of "orthodox" Southern cooking. Oysters in exotic Creole sauce, red snapper papillon, jambalaya, fine wines and the surroundings of a pleasant iron-balconied courtyard made the meal an event for Elspeth. Over ices and coffee she sighed.

"I am ruint," she told Mack, "but it's worth it."

"For once we agree," he told her. But he looked at his watch and frowned. "We've got to get parked at the St. Louis before dinner time and we're still a long way out of town. Let's go."

"You ought to be burped," said Elspeth, annoyed at having mundane considerations inflicted upon her happy satiation. They paid an unexpectedly modest check for their repast and took off again in the Pipit, once more restored to its road-running aspect.

They found a garage within a couple of blocks of the hotel, which was on a barriered-off Canal Street, walked slowly toward their seven-story destination, Mack grumbling at having to carry both suitcases.

"Hey—what's this?" the photographer inquired as they discovered that doors in the wall barring Canal Street opened for them by some sort of magic.

"Probably an electric eye or something," said Elspeth, glad for once to have come up first with a practical answer. Mack grunted and followed her on through, bumped into her, then froze behind her with equal astonishment.

"What the—?" he muttered. But the question was purely rhetorical. They understood now why the city's chief thoroughfare was barred to motor traffic. It was an immense moving boulevard, apparently arranged in eight strips, four of them moving in each direction. The two inner strips in either direction were considerably faster than those on the borders and there was a stationary strip in the center, apparently to permit passengers to change direction.

"Doesn't look so remarkable once you've seen it," said Mack at last, turning away. Elspeth said nothing, for after her first moment of rapture at seeing such a fantastic human dream fulfilled, she was forced to agree with him.

The moving strips seemed to run for several miles and were segmented at chief intersections. At their far end, beyond a number of vehicular overpasses, could be seen the lofty dome of a huge white building, which Elspeth judged to be the capitol of Columbia. At the river end of the moving boulevard was another dome atop a complex arrangement of marble arches, which she thought must be a memorial of some kind.

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But despite its sweep and newness of concept it was a disappointment. Like virtually every other publicly-owned project she had seen since entering this world it looked dingy and ill-tended. One of the inner strips seemed to be running faultily and was noisily protesting its ill health.

She wondered how often there were breakdowns and then decided she was thinking like Mack and disliked herself for it. She followed him dutifully along a slow strip to the Hotel St. Louis, another ornately balconied structure with a high almost cool lobby. The photographer went directly to the desk and asked a foppish mulatto assistant manager if there was a message for Mr. Horelle. This was according to instructions.

The manager at once unbent, handed Mack a note and summoned a bellboy for their bags without putting them through the routine of signing the register. As they rode up in another slow moving and ornately grilled elevator Mack grinned at her mockingly.

"Don't blame *me* if you have to sleep on the couch tonight—if there *is* a couch," he told her. "Horelle arranged this."

"I could spit," she replied. But to Mack's good-humored disappointment they were ushered into a suite of five rooms—a drawing room, two bedrooms and two baths. It was roomier but not quite as lush as the room and bath they had shared the night before at Bienville House in Baton Rouge.

ELSPETH'S first act was to brush her teeth with the powder she had found in her room in Atlanta. There was another such box in the mirrored cabinet above the bowl, as there seemed to be in all public bedrooms. Columbia, she thought, was a land of contradictions—of recent slavery, of feudal power, of no air travel—but of applied rocket power, cavity-killing toothpowder and disintegrator weapons—to say nothing of moving streets.

"'Hail Columbia, Happy Land," she told herself as she put her hair into some sort of rough order and wondered when if ever she would get a chance at a decent coiffure again. She found she was out of cigarettes and wandered into the drawing room, where Mack was comfortably smoking and studying one of the books he had purchased the night before.

"Help yourself," he said, waving at a package beside him when she told him she wanted a smoke. "Incidentally, I ordered drinks sent up. Thought we could use them."

"Is that all we have to do now?" she asked him.

"The message simply says we're to wait until Weston's mob makes contact," he told her. "It seems the government is making things hot for them."

"As if we didn't know," she replied, again aggrieved at his lack of courtesy in not lighting her a cigarette. There was something just a trifle *too* casual, *too* intimate, about his lack of manners. It was almost as if he thought they were—

The arrival of the man with the whisky and ice and soda cut short that dangerous line of thinking, for which she was grateful. She mixed herself a highball and, while the photographer did honors for himself, studied him carefully.

Certainly propinquity had not improved his somewhat battered features. His nose was as far off center as ever, his eyelids as thick with scar tissue. His body, while not bulky, was the next thing to it. But his looks might have been passable, even his voice—it was his damned materialistic soul that spoiled him for her.

She tried to forget the fact that he had extricated her at great risk to himself from a highly explosive situation that morning in Baton Rouge. Then she caught him looking at her and felt herself blush and turned away quickly. A shrill piping sound from outside caught her attention.

It grew louder and louder, reminiscent

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of scores of sirens, all stuck on one very high note. She moved instinctively toward the balcony but Mack, who had risen, caught her roughly by the arm.

"Careful," he said. "Remember what happened this morning."

"It's hardly likely to happen here," she replied. She almost had to shout as the shrill note seemed to come right into the room. Freeing herself she opened the french windows and stepped out.

On the far side of Canal Street was an armed motorcade, stalled on the fast strips that moved toward the capitol. First were small rocket cars, then trucks, then armored vehicles carrying big guns. In their center was a large gleaming rocket car.

Standing up in its rear was a tall military figure, magnificent in blue and silver, saluting continually a crowd that had assembled along the moving ways. As it came abreast of them they saw that it was Marshal Henry and that he was drawing cheers from the mob below.

Mack seized her shoulders to draw her back out of sight but not before the Negro chief of staff came abreast of them. As he did so his handsome black face lifted and his teeth showed white in a smile while he lifted his cockaded hat from his gray head in a direct salute.

"He saw us!" gasped Elspeth when they were back in the drawing room with the french windows tightly closed. "Mack, we've got to get out of here. I'm frightened."

"It's worse than that," said Mack, pacing the thick carpet and frowning. "He knew we were here. He didn't look up by accident. We're sitting ducks."

At that moment there was a sharp rap on the corridor door.

VI

THEY exchanged a brief and meaningful glance. Then Mack motioned Elspeth toward her room, crossed quickly to his own bedroom. The knock was repeated more sharply as he emerged, releasing the safety catch on his pistol. He stood well back from the door when he opened it.

A tall, pale, angular young man entered and stopped short at the sight of Mack's automatic. His light blue eyes were flashing with fright, as he turned to Elspeth, who stood in the bedroom doorway, then back to Mack. He laughed, nervously, stroked a thin lip mustache.

"Really!" he said and his voice sounded more British than any Elspeth had ever heard. *"Really!* I'm van Hooten. I'm here to get you to Reed Weston."

Elspeth broke out a smile of greeting but Mack motioned her away with his left hand. Keeping the newcomer covered, he peered quickly out into the hall, then shut the door and locked it. He studied their visitor with narrowed eyes, said, "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"Eh—what's that?" replied van Hooten. He laughed again. His height matched that of the photographer but his build was so much slighter that he seemed a far smaller man. He blinked and plucked a silk handkerchief from his sleeve to mop his brow.

"I'm waiting," said Mack ominously.

A spark of enlightenment lit van Hooten's eyes. "Oh, of course," he said. "The password—you quite frightened it out of me. Wilkinson, isn't it?"

"Aren't you sure?" said Mack. But he slipped the pistol into the waistband of his slacks and extended his right hand. "We've been waiting for you. You're prompt."

"Prompt—*haw!*" said van Hooten, eyeing the poetess with open interest. "As a matter of fact I'm bloody early. Just luck, my finding you in ahead of time. There's the deuce to pay just now. Raids, tipoffs, a regular crack-down."

"We'd better get started as soon as possible," said Mack. He offered van Hooten a cigarette, took one himself, accepted the flame of their visitor's expensive-looking gold lighter. "We had trou-

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ble in Baton Rouge this morning."

"Heard about it," said van Hooten. He hawed again. "Quite a trick, trapping the marshal in his scanties." He turned to Elspeth and said, "You may call me Everard, my dear."

"And you may call me Miss Marriner," said Elspeth, "a privilege I allow only my most intimate friends."

"Haw-*haw!*" said Everard. "*Very* amusing, my dear."

"If you two will stop clowning for a moment," said Mack rudely, "we have reason to believe Marshal Henry knows we're here."

"An open secret." Van Hooten dismissed the fact with a graceful flick of one hand. "Everyone in the know has been expecting you for absolutely days."

"He knows we're here in this suite," said Mack stubbornly. "I think it's time to move on."

"But that can't *be!*" said Everard, looking astonished. "I mean, it simply isn't possible that—"

He was interrupted by another knock on the door and Mack once again answered it, gun in hand. But it was only the boy with the check for the drinks, which he had forgotten on his first trip. Mack paid it, tipped him, waved him on his way.

"You know where Reed Weston is," he said. "Get us to him."

"It's not so awfully simple," said the visitor aggrievedly. Then, with a shrug, "But I rather fancy we'd better hop to it at that. Your duffle all packed and ready?"

They were ready in a matter of minutes. Before they left Mack said, "I presume they want us to provide transportation."

"But that's the whole *idea!*" exclaimed Everard, shocked. He patted his forehead delicately with his sleeve kerchief. "You have no idea what an appalling sensation you caused this morning when you lifted your little car—*brrrrrppp*—right into the air. The wires have been simply buzzing with it all day."

"Very well," said Mack, who was becoming even grumpier than usual under the impact of Everard's orchidaceous effluence. His lips tight, he led the way out of the hotel. As usual Elspeth found herself carrying her own suitcase. Mack had to have one hand free, and van Hooten made no effort to assist her.

They got out of the hotel and to the garage without incident of any kind, rather to Elspeth's surprise. She consoled herself, as they took off along the uneven streets in the faithful Pipit, with the fact that apparently she was not going to spend the night in a prison cell—but the luxury of the St. Louis, a bath, good food and a soft bed, lingered nostalgically.

SITTING between the two men she let her thoughts rove over the possibility of a bit of verse upon the subject. She would title it *Creature Comforts* and it would be a homely little poem with none of the abstract frills of free verse. It should rhyme, she thought, and consist of three sestets with an unexpected little rhyme break linking the middle of the lines.

The beat—it could be basically simple, even iambic. But carefully so—she had never been able to abide the basis of doggerel, not even in early school days. She began to consider the things she missed most when she didn't have them.

There was that dreadful thing of Kipling about "a woman is only a woman but a good cigar is a smoke."

She could get in a lick for her own sex, perhaps. Perhaps—the *word* perhaps—was important. She thought of ways and means.

". . . a man, perhaps, but then, a sigh
Is all collapse of any of my loves
Has left me with—and much more dearly I
Prefer the myth that liquor dies with cloves
Or that my firm-fleshed skin will never dry

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Nor my poor hands grow thin, force
me to gloves . . ."

It was complex and she had wandered away from the subject—but it was there as a third sestet. She rather liked the variety between the in-a-line rhyme and that of the final syllables. She built backward, toward the first sestet, was suddenly jolted out of her abstraction as Mack reached rudely across her to take a map Everard van Hooten had pulled from his pocket.

They were parked at the side of a wide palm-lined avenue on the outskirts of the city. Mack studied the map and went into his familiar frown as he traced their course.

"Looks awfully close to the Rio Grande," he commented. "I thought Weston was north of Texas."

"Oh, Mr. Weston keeps on the move—he has to," said Everard, buffing his nails on his flaring lapel. "Confidentially he's arranged a meeting with an envoy of the emperor. He's running himself ragged, poor man, in an effort to stop this silly war."

"Umm," said Mack. He studied the map some more, then handed it back across Elspeth to Everard. "Well, we'll give it a try."

"And are you actually going to take this delightful car of yours right into the air?" van Hooten asked in his absurd accent.

"When we're clear of the city and it gets darker," said Mack. "Otherwise we'll be days and probably get caught."

"This *is* a bit of a thrill," said van Hooten, shivering.

"Are you British, Everard?" Elspeth asked him.

He turned to regard her, his eyes wide with delight. "But of *course* not!" he exclaimed. "How divine of you to have thought so. I come from outside Boston, you know, where we value our British ancestry most highly. I *couldn't* be more pleased."

"And I couldn't be more sleepy," said Elspeth, yawning. The strain of the last week, the continued presence of danger all about them, had induced in her sudden and unbearable fatigue. "If you two supermen don't mind, I'd like to curl up in back for a nap." She yawned again.

"But of course," said Everard, opening the door to make way for her. Mack, not moving, said, "Go to it, Elly. You may need it."

She gave him one of her special Mack-looks and got into the back of the Pipit. Mack got it going again and she made herself reasonably comfortable—and of course at once ceased to be sleepy. She lay there, watching palms and occasional buildings flash by, and wondered what was going to happen next.

Strange world or no, Everard simply didn't ring true. Disregarding his blatant effeminacy, he seemed a most unlikely sort of agent to be operating either for the stalwart idealistic Reed Weston or the aristocratic Dr. Horelle.

His effeteness, she decided, could be traced back to the fact that he came from the Northeast, whose best blood had been drained in the gutters of civil war almost a century earlier. But his loquacity made him an unlikely agent, unless he were far cleverer than he seemed and used his talk as camouflage for silence.

Mack, she knew, was dissatisfied with him, too—but Mack was accepting him as the only presently available means of escape from their trap. And Everard wanted to take them almost to the border of Empire territory—along with the Pipit, an incredibly valuable instrument in a world that knew no airplanes.

IT WAS hot and not even the speed of the Pipit raised a cooling breeze. Finally Elspeth did doze off, uncomfortably and to unpleasant dreams in which a huge black general with a disintegrator gun fired at an orchidaceous Mack with a purple bee tattooed behind his left ear, and she flung herself between them but not in time to save either of them.

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Her dust and Mack's and that of the orchidaceous one were strangely mingled as they rose slowly in orange twilight—and the black-skinned general grew in height to match theirs and once more aimed his dreadful weapon at them. This time it meant—

She awoke and for a moment her dream was real—and then she realized that they were actually flying through the dusk with the sunset ahead and a trifle to their right. She shook herself and shivered, for it was blessedly cool after the New Orleans heat, and wondered, as do the half-awake, about her dream.

Shaking herself clear she fumbled for her handbag, found it and dug out her makeup kit. Her fingers found the light switch and she turned it on, gasped at what her nap had done to her already scrambled grooming.

"Turn off that light," said Mack. "We're too low."

She did so but not before she had again seen the purple bee. It was there—half hidden by the fringe of his haircut—behind Everard's left ear. She must have noted it subconsciously earlier and recalled it in her sleep. A silly sort of decoration for such an exquisite as Everard to indulge in—but she supposed it was one of the ridiculous fads the Everards of this or any world take delight in. She wondered why it should have alarmed her.

And then, of course, came the shaft of light. It was as lucid as if she had an X-ray handy with which she could read whatever secret papers, if any, Everard van Hooten carried upon his person. She knew what he was and why and where he was taking them.

They changed course slightly, letting the Sun move further to their right, and the tattoo vanished. Apparently it had to be seen from just the right angle, with the light coming from beneath and at a very flat angle. Ordinarily, even with the shortest of haircuts, it would not show at all.

The bee—the symbol of Napoleon the First's empire—and purple, the imperial color. She should, of course, have understood its implications at once—at last in conjunction with van Hooten's overemphasized New Englandism and his insistence upon taking them close to the border of Mexico.

But in her world there was no Napoleonic Mexican Empire and New England was not a drained-out, defeated area of little opportunity for young men—if Everard actually qualified as a man. It was entirely understandable from a psychological viewpoint. Unable to endure the conditions of living in his native land, unable to feel sympathy for the rude vigor of the Reed Weston revolt, he had been drawn to the Empire as by a lodestone. And what more natural than that the Empire should put him to work as a secret agent.

Elspeth knew it as clearly as if van Hooten had told her—but what to do about it was something else again. If

[*Turn page*]

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Everard were armed, as he probably was, he might take advantage of any diversion she could make and force them to fly him to Mexico. Or he might have a disintegrator weapon himself. He would not use it on both of them, for they were the only two folk in this world who knew how to fly and, more important, to land the Pipit. But used against either one of them it would be tragic enough.

Elspeth sat there in the rear and fought her galloping nerves and wondered what to do. For once she could not rely on Mack. Everard was far too quick of understanding not to suspect at once any attempt at double talk which she might make in an effort to warn the photographer. And Mack's sensitivities were by no means so certain.

They flew on into the southwest in the gathering dusk, and Elspeth wondered what to do—for she was going to have to do something and do it both soon and effectively. She felt in her handbag for anything that could be made to serve as a weapon.

THERE was nothing. The pencil of rouge with which she tinted her lips was of too small a bore—especially since Everard had seen Mack's automatic. A hairpin would scarcely unlock this puzzle. She lifted the bag to cast it aside in its uselessness.

Of course—the bag itself. It was a rectangular affair, fashioned about a frame of heavy metal with sharp corners. British-made, there was nothing flimsy about its construction. If she could bring one of the corners down sharply on one of Everard's temples, it should at least stun him.

She eyed him, gripping the bag tightly, seeking just the right spot—she would have only one real chance and it would have to be good. Chills were rising through her body like vapor from a container of liquid oxygen.

Suddenly he flung an arm over the back of the seat and turned toward her. His face was alight with enthusiasm. "Isn't flying simply too tremendous?" he asked her rhetorically.

"It can get very dull once you're accustomed to it," she replied, noting with some surprise that her voice was steady.

He uttered some further precious banalities to which she managed to muster replies, wondering when, if ever, he was going to turn around again. At last she saw a cluster of lights ahead of them and asked him what city they were approaching.

"*Jove!*" he exclaimed, turning to make identification. "That must be Dallas. See, Fort Worth lies just beyond. Dreadful sinkhole, that cowtown. It—"

She struck then, swiftly, hard, with a prayer in her heart that her aim be true. The corner of her bag caught him just above and in front of his left ear as he leaned slightly forward, the better to see out the window beside and ahead of him.

There were a surprisingly slight shock of contact and a dull *thock* as Elspeth's blow went home. She had a horrid moment of choking fear in which it seemed as if she had not struck hard enough to accomplish anything at all.

Her panic endured while Everard continued to lean forward, motionless. Then slowly his body began to slip. His knees buckled as he slumped off the seat and crumpled against the corner of the cabin, his head lolling forward drunkenly. A dark trickle began to move slowly down from his left temple.

"What the—" said Mack, looking around at Everard, then back at Elspeth, who was crouched forward, handbag raised to swing once more. His eyes popped as if he thought she was crazy.

"Put on the autocon," she told him. "We've got to tie Everard up and search him. He's an Imperialist spy."

"You're crazy if you—" Mack began. Then his eyes narrowed and he pushed the automatic control switch and turned on the cabin lights. The air was steady under the Pipit and she flew on toward Mexico. He dragged the unconscious Everard up onto the seat and, with Elspeth's aid, they got him into the back

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and laid him out.

"Quite a wallop you gave the poor devil," said the photographer unemotionally. "What makes you think he's a spy?"

She told him. Although she had to explain the significance of the bee, Mack did not laugh at her, somewhat to her surprise. Instead he regarded her gravely and uttered a clipped, "Thanks. I've been smelling something odd about Everard right along and I don't mean this perfume he's using."

"Mack!" Elspeth said with sudden horror. "You don't suppose I—"

"He's not dead," said Mack without sympathy. "Come on—before he comes to—let's see what he's carrying."

They found a flat little weapon, something like a pistol in outline but very different in detail if not in purpose, in a cleverly built-in holster where the watch pocket of his trousers should have been. Mack eyed it dubiously.

"Of course, it's not proof," he said. "Wonder what it does?"

"Don't try it here," said Elspeth, practical for once. "It might burn a hole in the Pipit— Mack, he's coming to!"

She gasped this last as a surprisingly steely hand suddenly gripped her by the wrist and she found herself staring into a pair of malevolent ice-blue eyes whose viciousness went beyond anything in her memory.

VII

"WHY did you hit me?" Everard van Hooten asked softly. His voice was still low and well-modulated but effeminacy had been replaced by a steel-alloy tone.

"Because I caught sight of the bee behind your ear," said the poetess, struggling a little as she sought to regain her freedom. "I knew you were directing us into an Imperialist trap."

The light blue eyes still bored into hers—for a long moment. The metallic fingers still gripped her wrist. She said, "Mack, he's hurting me. Make him let go."

"Cut it out," said Mack and the pistol in his hand lifted in preparation for a blow. Everard glanced at the photographer out of the corner of an eye, shrugged slightly, then released Elspeth with a smile of resignation.

"Very well," he said. "I'll be good. I shouldn't have lost control but the young lady made me so darned *mad!"*

"You're only mad at yourself for letting her knock you cold," said Mack unexpectedly. Elspeth felt a sudden glow of pride in her achievement. Then she saw the blood still trickling from the van Hooten temple and pride changed to inner sickness. She had always hated violence and physical force of any kind.

"I don't suppose there's any sense trying to dupe you two charming people," said Everard, mopping his temple with his sleeve kerchief and regarding the resultant stain with distaste.

"You did very well up to a point," said Elspeth, "but the answer from now on is a resounding no."

"Very well," Everard repeated in resignation. He was still an exquisite but no longer offensively so. "I'll put my cards on the table. My offer might be interesting."

"Probably, but it won't work," said Mack.

"Oh heavens, an inflexible character," sighed van Hooten. "But I'll make it for all that. Yes, I work for the Emperor. We got word that Weston was about to get something exceptional from the East some days ago. And when word of your escape from Baton Rouge reached New Orleans this morning we knew it was time to act."

"I should think you'd be on Weston's side in view of the situation between Columbia and the Empire," said Mack. Without taking his eyes off van Hooten he handed Elspeth his pistol, added, "Keep him covered every minute, even if he pretends to go to sleep, Elly. You can do it better from the rear seat."

"Careful codgers, aren't you?" Everard said, again shrugged. "Still, I can't say that I blame you. It isn't quite that

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simple, my dear Fraser. Granted the Empire has no intention of losing a war to Columbia, we still aren't in favor of Reed Weston and his rag-tag-and-bob-tail anarchists.

"We'd like to have Weston on our side—where we can keep his ambitions within bounds, naturally. He—or his group, rather—have some things we could use to keep Columbia checked. Since your flying machine seems to be one of the things that is important to Weston we decided it was important to us—and after being in it I have no doubt that it will not only win us any war Columbia chooses to wage but will probably prevent any such war."

"And you want us to stop this war by turning the Pipit over to the Empire?" said Elspeth slowly.

"Of course," said van Hooten. "That's why I'm here."

"And just how did you manage to get here?" Mack asked coolly.

"Really!" Everard's tone was patronizing. "We have our own cells planted with both factions north of the border. Obtaining your itinerary and password and preventing Weston's agents from fulfilling their appointments was scarcely difficult to arrange. Some of our agents in the Columbian service will receive honors from President Wilkinson for exposing Weston's spies."

"You're really very frank," said Elspeth, wondering whether she disliked this version of van Hooten more than the earlier one. "You wish us to work for a *pax Mexicana.*"

"It will be someone's peace, come what may," said Everard with still another shrug. "In years to come it will scarcely matter. And the Empire is in a position to give far more for your services and that of the—er—Pipit than anyone else involved." He looked from one to the other, his eyes narrowing slightly, his voice increasingly bland as he added, "Money, of course, but more—much more. Your choice of some of the finest estates in the Empire, high position, even titles. You can have them all."

ELSPETH, in spite of herself, was tempted. She had a sudden vision of life as a great and noble lady in a magnificent white palace, surrounded by servants, knowing every luxury, endowed with fertile lands whose harvests would provide her magnificently and sumptuously for life.

"By the way," said Mack, "how does it happen that so many fine estates are vacant in the Empire?"

Everard made a deprecatory gesture. "People die," he told them. "Without heirs estates sometimes revert to the crown."

"But *how* do they die—and *why?*" said Mack stubbornly.

"We do not live in Utopia," said Everard casually. "But neither of you will have a thing to fear—not with your knowledge of this flying device—and doubtless of other things."

"Fine," said Mack. *"Great!* Where do we find Reed Weston?"

"Why should I know that?" asked van Hooten, laughing.

"Because you knew how, where and when to find us," said Mack flatly. Elspeth, who was beginning to learn his moods, sensed the terrible anger in him and felt unwilling admiration stir inside herself. He was so strong, so—

Suddenly she snapped out of it. *"Mack!"* she cried. "He's stringing us along. We'll be over the border before long and our fuel won't last forever. Turn north, Mack, turn north."

Everard called her an unspeakable name and with a venom that struck her almost like a blow. Mack twitched as if he longed to hit the Imperial agent where it would do the most good but got control of himself and, wordlessly, snapped off the autocon and took over the steering himself, banking the Pipit in a sharp turn. Everard made a motion as if to stop him but Elspeth jabbed the muzzle of the automatic hard in the back of his neck. The gesture was determined, uncompromising.

"Don't," she said. "Killing you would be a pleasure." Then to Mack, "How

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about Fort Smith? We know that's a Weston base. Can we make it on what we've got?"

"Not a chance," he told her. "We'll have to land somewhere and soon. Keep an eye out for an unoccupied highway."

They landed half an hour later on a deserted stretch of road between Fort Worth and a large community to the north, non-existent in Mack's and Elspeth's world, known as Wilkinson City. The fuel meter already registered below zero, and both of them were edgy.

Everard, on the contrary, seemed blissfully content. He had said not a word from the moment when Mack had announced they would have to return to Earth shortly, scarcely moved except to light, smoke and discharge an occasional gold-tipped monogrammed cigarette.

They were climbing a long very flat hill—an apparent rarity in that level terrain—when a sudden glow of lights over its top horizon made Elspeth hope that they were coming to some sort of community in which they could purchase the fuel that would enable them to renew their air journey to Fort Smith.

But Mack suddenly turned the Pipit off the road, jouncing it over a shallow ditch and into an uneven field. To Elspeth's cry of protest he said, "Those lights are moving, Elly. Watch Everard, for the love of Pete!"

"I'm quite comfortable, thank you," said van Hooten. The smile with which he accompanied the words—it was there in his voice—was invisible as Mack cut the lights of the Pipit and brought the little car to a quick halt.

Almost as he did so the first headlights—with a yellowish sodium glare—topped the crest of the rise, seeming to move toward them as they came on down the road, the jet exhausts of the vehicles flaming brilliantly in the darkness.

For a moment, despite her awareness of Everard as a potential threat, Elspeth's attention was irresistibly attracted by the terrible yet majestic spectacle of the military convoy as it sped along the highway and past them, barely a hundred yards away.

The Columbian tanks and trucks and armored cars moved with a hissing near-rocket sound that drowned out the rumble of their heavy wheels on the road. Evidently the caterpillar tread was not a feature of the Columbian scene mechanized divisions, but the wheels which supported the heavy vehicles were ugly, powerful and complex in construction.

IN THE glare of the sodium lights and the flare of the exhausts, uniformed men riding the trucks and those atop the larger armored cars and tanks looked literally like some sort of demons. And the snouts of the cannons, without exception covered and pointing rearward to avoid exhaust flares and dust, were deadly in appearance. The whole long convoy seemed unworldly—as indeed it was.

"Blast it, I told you to *watch* him!" Mack said suddenly and angrily. Elspeth, who had been watching the spectacle entranced, became aware of the fact that her charge had vanished. The open door at his side of the car told the story all too plainly.

Elspeth slammed the door, checked its lock and that of the others. With them sealed she and Mack were reasonably safe from counterattack. Mack muttered curses and derogatory remarks about females and female poetesses in particular until Elspeth asked him sharply why he hadn't given her warning if he was so alert—and whether he still had the Imperialist spy's pistol.

"The damned spy must have picked my pocket!" the photographer shouted when he discovered that the strange little weapon was missing. "Come on—we've got to get out of here before he can give an alarm. Let's get going."

It was a rugged takeoff and a dangerous one for several reasons—among them the darkness and rough terrain, the possible proximity of Everard and his weapon, the nearness of the Colum-

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bian column. But the Pipit again proved her worth by getting off the ground without mishap and apparently without drawing notice from the soldiers who were moving southward along the highway.

"If the fuel gives out we're gone geese," said Mack grimly, but they topped the hill easily, spotted the end of the column streaming over it and—joy of joys—a small city not more than five miles ahead of them.

They landed beyond sight of the soldiery and managed to get to a refuelling station just on the outskirts of the city, whose name, according to map and sign, was Burrville. The Pipit's motor coughed despairingly as they pulled up in front of the pump.

The station attendant was curious about the Pipit but Mack once more passed it off by explaining it was of a new British make. They got their needed gallons and decided to spend the night in Burrville if they could find lodgings that seemed reasonably safe.

As if to make up for their troubles since early morning, the night passed calmly. They had no trouble getting a suite of surprisingly clean and modern rooms in a surprisingly new and handsome hotel. On a card hanging from the doorknob of the drawing room of their suite hung a sign that read: YOU WANT IT—WE'VE GOT IT—IF WE HAVEN'T, WE'LL GET IT—JUST ASK US.

"Texas," said Elspeth, regarding the sign with a smile, "is evidently Texas no matter what world it's in. Want a nice redhead, Mack? Just ask."

"You're about as funny as Everard," said Mack, scowling at her. "Listen, Elly, let's turn in and get some sleep. We've got a long way to go tomorrow."

Elspeth that night got her second decent sleep since leaving New York—her first since the visit to Mr. Horelle's mysterious house of many worlds. But once again she was awake before Mack, who seemed to be suffering from the rigors of their expedition. She ordered breakfast sent up for both of them, decided to have a hot bath while she awaited its arrival and, in the tub, read the news that had been stuck beneath her door.

It was a highly lurid gazette, its front page sprinkled with bright green headlines in large type. There was a big story about a young lady who had ridden in from her ranch in some sort of an automobile and run amok in the night-club belt after imbibing a suitable amount of redeye. This seemed scarcely remarkable save for the fact that she was wearing only a ten-gallon hat and a pair of cowboy boots while indulging in her spree.

There was a feature about a famous Parisian actress, who had declared the mountain lions of Texas were the only fitting pets and playmates for a woman of real spirit and had promptly been presented with a half-dozen of the large and ferocious beasts—for which she was bringing suit against the donors on charges of shattering not only her nerves but her wardrobe.

There were a couple of pages of sports, in which Elspeth had little interest. Then came a few items of news, hung beneath their respective date-lines in a single inside column. It was the second of these that brought Elspeth out of the tub in a hurry.

The item stated in brief and censored language that Reed Weston's headquarters in Norman, Oklahoma, announced the visit of envoys from the Mexican Empire, and gave this as absolute proof of the rebel Weston's absolute perfidy where his native Columbia was concerned.

Elspeth was dressed when the waiter brought up the food. Mack came out of his bedroom, rubbing his eyes and yawning, and got to work on an incredible red-hot Texas meal of steak a la rancheria and huevos rancheros, frijoles and chile con carne, all washed down with black chicory-packed Mexican coffee.

"Take a look at this," Elspeth said

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when he had eaten all he could. "It should shorten our journey considerably."

Mack read it, laid it down and slammed it with the flat of a hand. "So he's still moving south. That's swell for us. On the strength of spotting that and after this breakfast, you're in good again, Elly."

"I couldn't care less," she retorted. But Mack merely gave a snort and went back to his room to dress.

THEY drove out of Burrville unhindered and took off shortly after leaving the city limits from a lonely flat stretch of road. Thanks to the map, Mack had little difficulty in plotting a course for Norman, Oklahoma. Elspeth, feeling that their incredible assignment was close to completion, to say nothing of feeling clean and refreshed after bath and slumber, was almost gay as they sped high above generally flat country.

"It's funny," she said to Mack when they had been airborne about an hour, "that the paper said so little about war."

"I don't think many people in this world believe war is actually coming. They've lived in peace for a long time now."

"Then there probably wouldn't have been war anyway," said Elspeth, studying a swallow-shaped cloud shadow far beneath them.

"There probably would have been—and still will be if we don't fulfill our mission," said Mack quietly. "These people lack experience of war—so they don't know they're almost in one. Only people like Mr. Horelle and this Everard seem to understand."

"I'm glad he escaped," said Elspeth impulsively.

"I'm not," said Mack, "even though I'm damned if I know what we could have done with him—except kill him."

"*Mack!*" said the poet, shocked at his grimness. "You're joking—aren't you, Mack?"

"Never less so," said the photographer. "That Everard is one of the most dangerous blokes I ever met—and I won't feel safe in this world as long as things remain unsettled. He may look and talk like a prime daisy but, believe me, he's cute and he's tough."

"Ummmm," said Elspeth. She didn't want to talk any more—she wanted to get back her sense of well-being. They flew on in silence until, close to their destination, Mack uttered an exclamation and peered out the window at his side.

"For the love of heaven!" he exclaimed. "Look at that!"

He banked the Pipit so that Elspeth was able to follow his gaze. Some nine thousand feet beneath them, in the concave flat center of a hill-ringed valley, was a large clearing surrounded by low buildings that almost blended with the ground.

In the center of the clearing, held upright by elaborate metal scaffolding, was a gigantic silver bullet, around which men were moving with the labored slowness of ants. Its size was tremendous by the late-morning shadow it cast, a shadow which reached almost to the row of buildings farthest to the west. It looked as unlike something from the Columbian world as it did like anything from the original world of Elspeth and Mack.

"What is it?" the girl asked curiously.

"I may be out of my mind—I've begun to suspect so anyway lately," said Mack, "but it looks to me like a spaceship."

"A space-ship!" echoed Elspeth. She peered back at it more curiously, realizing that she was staring at the near-fulfillment of one of man's oldest dreams. Then, as they sped on past it, she asked, "Does it look to you as if it would work?"

"Can't tell from here, Elly," he told her, "but it's mighty impressive. This Reed Weston must be something if his boys have built that in this scientific scrambled egg of a world."

Elspeth thought about it as they

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came in on one of the roads leading to Norman. Horelle had told her nothing of such a development. He had, in fact, been a little vague about Reed Weston and his plans, except to say that they needed the Pipit desperately. The idea of travel to the planets, perhaps the stars, was deeply stirring.

"This is exciting," she said to Mack as they sped along a smooth two-lane highway toward the city.

"Yeah," said Mack, "more so than I like—*look out!*"

He braked suddenly, just in time to avoid crashing full into a large armored truck which had suddenly pulled across the pavement in front of them. Seconds later they had been arrested, were being driven to some sort of headquarters by a wordless and highly efficient military. Mack tried to protest but was politely told to keep quiet. Their captors hustled them into a large office where a tall uniformed man was standing behind a desk.

His skin was coal black, his teeth a flashing white. He was Marshal Henry!

VIII

ELSPETH felt a sudden sickening sense of failure. They had come so far in this strange world, had endured so much. Now it appeared to have been all for nothing. She glanced covertly at Mack for encouragement but the bleakness of his expression sent her morale plummetting to a new low. Marshal Henry's appearance here in Reed Weston's headquarters was as much of a wallop to him as it was to her.

"Sit down, my young friends," said the black marshal, leaning forward with his knuckles on his desk. "I'm sorry if this is a bit of a shock—but you gave me a shock yesterday." His white teeth flashed again as he smiled.

"I'm afraid I don't get it," said Mack, sinking almost without looking into one of the large leather chairs with which the big room was well equipped. Speechless, Elspeth followed his example. The marshal's manner was so guilessly good humored.

"That's understandable, of course," said the huge Negro. "If I hadn't permitted a certain inherited love of the theatrical to overcome my good sense yesterday afternoon in New Orleans we might have made the trip here together. As it was my agents were exactly five minutes too late. But since you are here—welcome."

"Marshal Henry, it simply doesn't make sense," said Elspeth almost wailing. "Whose side *are* you on? We thought—"

"I can pretty well guess your thoughts," said Marshal Henry in his deep, pleasant tones. "Unfortunately we had no opportunity to talk together yesterday or the evening before. I was on my way to a conference with the president's secretary in my suite when we met in the elevator. And yesterday morning I could scarcely reveal my plan. Incidentally, Miss Marriner, I am deeply grateful for learning from you that the Presidential Guards were actually using the disintegrator. It hastened my move, of course."

"Is—whatever it is—outlawed?" Elspeth asked eagerly.

"By every recognized government in the world," said Henry with a lurking anger in his eyes. "It was done—arming the guard—without my knowledge."

"But as Chief of Staff—" Mack began.

"As Chief of Staff I was a figurehead," said Marshal Henry drily. "Do you think the little group that runs this country is going to give a black man real authority?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Elspeth. "But I'm glad in a way. It means you are on Reed Weston's side really."

"For a long time Reed and I have been friends," said Marshal Henry, softening. "I have done all my oath to the Republic permitted me to do to support his ideas. But until the accident of your seeing the disintegrator in use, permitted me to turn in my resignation yesterday, Miss Marriner, my help has been

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limited to sympathy."

"If you were on Weston's side all along, Marshal, why didn't you help us escape yesterday morning?" Mack asked sharply.

The black marshal looked at him and shook his head sadly. "If there was more I could have done for you, please tell me," he said. "I could have had you arrested at any moment between my rooms and the garage. Incidentally, when your car took to the air over the heads of those guards I—well, it was grand."

"Sorry," said Mack. "Thanks for being so patient. We ran afoul of an Imperial spy named van Hooten or we'd have been here some time yesterday evening."

"Van Hooten?" Marshal Henry's black brows lifted measurably. "Imperialist? I've met the young Northerner but never gave him the credit for being more than an overdressed jellyfish."

"Elly—Miss Marriner—spotted him," said Mack. "He had a purple bee tattooed behind his left ear."

"Thank you again for information which may be vitally important," said the tall soldier, making a little bow to Elspeth.

"It was—it was just luck both times," said the poetess, feeling her face grow embarrassingly hot. As usual, when embarrassed and unable to flee, she took refuge in the world of reverie, and began to study Marshal Henry, the marvelous planes of his face, the vast strength of the man beneath his simple gray field tunic, the ebon brilliance of his skin, the perfect roundness of his head.

SHE let herself consider an ode to an African, an African risen high in the service of a white world which forever kept nudging him away from the supreme positions and honors his talents and devotion deserved. It would have to be very deep, very subtle, if it weren't to be maple syrup. But perhaps she—

"Miss Marriner!" Marshal Henry's voice was slightly raised, and Elspeth came to with a guilty start. He went on serenely as if she had not let her mind wander. "Before you meet Reed Weston I want to tell you some things about him—sketch in his background. Otherwise you might not understand him. I understand you are new to Columbia and its problems and figures."

"Sorry," said Elspeth. "Yes, we're very green."

"And potentially very valuable," said Marshal Henry. He had lit a long very thin cigar and was sitting on a corner of the desk. His was a personality both intensely likeable and immensely impressive. Character and compassion seemed to come from him, yet the poetess sensed an innate core of toughness that left no doubt that here was a born soldier, a born commander of men.

"You see, Reed Weston is the son of a swag-grabber," he said. "The swag-grabbers were avaricious men who invaded the northeastern states after the Civil War—*they* call it the Second Revolution—during the period of erratic conditions that followed the Elmira surrender.

"They bought land, votes, people—everything they could lay their hands on legally. When they couldn't do it legally they altered the laws to suit themselves. The swag-grabbers are one of the reasons the Northeast still feels resentment against the rest of the nation. Frankly, none of us blame them today for feeling so.

"It so happened that Weston's father got hold of a brilliant young New York inventor named Edison—Thomas Edison—and forced him to sell his patents for a song. They proved immensely valuable—our lights, our basic rocket patents, our metal alloys are still dependent in large degree upon those patents.

"Edison shot himself shortly after his patents were stolen and Harlan Weston—Reed Weston's father—became fabulously rich. Reed Weston himself was born into one of the greatest fortunes in Columbia. He is still vastly wealthy in spite of the fact that he is virtually

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outlawed. His patent royalties still roll in.

"But Reed Weston—" Marshal Henry paused to flick a long slender ash from his cigar into a hole with a metal rim set in the corner of the desk—"has suffered all his life from a sense of guilt caused by the way in which his father obtained his wealth. He has always had a burning desire to make such wrongs impossible."

"I understand," said Elspeth simply. Mack, frowning in concentration, nodded and uttered a grunt of assent.

"Reed Weston," Marshal Henry went on quietly, "is, perhaps because of this sense of guilt, at times an impatient man. He is capable of being badly hurt when those about him fail to live up to his ideals. He was thus hurt when the government refused to accept the reforms he knew were needed. He was hurt again this morning when I got here and told him of the violation of civilized law by the use of the disintegrator."

"A man who wants to make changes has got to be tough," said Mack in his characteristic flat tones.

"Reed is tough—make no mistake about that," said the black marshal. "But he is a man driven by his inner compulsions. He is also a great scientist, probably the greatest in the world today. As a child he determined to give his life to justifying his father's deed by living up to the Edison tradition."

"If he's responsible for that spaceship we saw while flying in just now, he's a wonder," Mack remarked, lighting a cigarette.

"Me too," said Elspeth but it was Marshal Henry who gave her a smoke and lit it for her. Mack, as usual, seemed entirely unabashed. His lack of courtesy, Elspeth decided with resignation, amounted almost to an elemental force.

"Your flying over the *Mars* was reported to me," said Henry with a flicker of interest. "That was why I sent out a patrol to bring you in. We were worried about what might have happened to you after you left New Orleans and wanted to make sure you got here without further incident. Your recognizing the *Mars* for what it is makes you more important than ever to us."

"Marshal Henry," said Mack, "may I ask some questions?" The marshal nodded and Mack frowning, went on with, "I don't understand why, if you have rocket power and space-ships, you don't have airplanes?"

"Airplanes?" said Marshal Henry, looking puzzled.

"Heavier-than-air flying machines—the Pipit, our machine, is a convertible plane," Mack explained. "You have disintegrators, rocket weapons, all sort of wonders, but no planes."

MARSHAL HENRY walked the carpet with long-legged strides, casting an occasional thoughtful glance at one or the other of his visitors. Finally he resumed his seat on the desk corner, lit a fresh slim cigar and said, "You must come from far away indeed."

"We do," said Elspeth. "I thought you knew. But that doesn't answer Mack's question." She was frightened at her temerity in speaking so but the black marshal only smiled faintly.

"I don't know. I only know that Reed vouches for you," he said. "As for Mack's question, I think I know the answer. We have never been able to develop a sufficiently light engine to drive such a craft. Perhaps we developed rocket power too early. That is why your—Pipit, is it?—is such a thundering surprise to us here. When I saw her sprout wings and fly—"

He shook his head in remembered amazement. Mack put his cigarette down a metal-lined hole in the arm of his chair and said, "Marshal, we'd like to know two more things—why we are here and when we can meet Reed Weston."

"I can answer your second question," said the marshal with a glance at a traveling clock on the desk. "Reed Weston is due here in exactly three minutes. As to your purpose—" he paused

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briefly and looked doubtful, even grim—"I believe it is to keep Reed Weston from leaving this planet forever."

"Good Lord!" said Mack, coming out of his chair. "He's going to leave Earth—but where is he going? The other planets—"

"Mars is entirely habitable," said the Marshal. "Reed visited the planet last year in a small space-rocket and found conditions at least superficially suitable for habitation by men."

"How did he get back?" Elsepth wanted to know. "I mean, if you—he has no planes, how did he land?"

"He didn't—on Mars," said the marshal quietly. "He and his crew circled it twice and were able to take atmosphere samples and spectographic and other readings of the surface. They landed here by parachute. Reed broke his leg."

"Good heavens!" Mack exploded. "And now he's going back in that monster rocket we saw from the Pipit?"

"He's taking the sixty best brains and bodies of Earth with him," said Marshal Henry quietly. "I feel honored that there is a place for me aboard. But I have refused to go. My place is here, where I am needed more. So is Reed's."

"*Poppycock!*" said a new voice. A stocky, dynamic little man with an immense bulldog face, flaming red hair and staccato stride, voice and motions moved into the center of the room as a door shut softly behind him. "You'll be needed a lot more on Mars, John."

John Henry—the name rang bells in Elsepth's memory. She knew the old legends of the great John Henry, the mighty black riverman of her world, of course. And here, in this world, John Henry was a latter-day reality.

A new sense of his magnificence swept over her. The marshal was cast in the mold of heroes—physically, mentally, spiritually. He was refusing a place in the greatest adventure man had yet known in order to face the petty hatreds of men who could never forgive the color of his skin, of men who might well try him for treason.

To Elspeth he towered over Reed Weston, and his size was not merely a matter of bodily height and breadth and thickness of chest. Here, she thought, was a man who was close to God. She superimposed upon his actual image a vision of the legendary John Henry of her own world, saw how the two forms merged into single focus.

She realized that Reed Weston was talking angrily to both John Henry and Mack, flapping his short arms as he spoke.

". . . and now you tell me those corrupt and criminal fools have put disintegrators into the hands of their own precious condottiere with orders to use them at will. I ask you, why should I stay on such a world? What can you or anyone else offer me better than an opportunity to create a new world on a planet where such idiots do not exist?"

SOMEHOW Elspeth found herself on her feet. Within her was memory of the sad, wise eyes of Mr. Horelle, of all she and Mack had been through on this mission, of Marshal John Henry, of the evil Everard, of the long motorized columns of armed men and their counterparts south of the border, moving toward inevitable collision at arms. It had to come out and it did.

"We can offer you the need of millions who want only a chance to follow the ways of peace and progress," she said, and she knew she was shouting and didn't care. "We offer you the job you seek to run away from, even though in your heart and the hearts of those who would go with you, you know you will never forgive yourselves.

"You can never fly from yourselves, you can never forget the ruin of those whose desertion by you will leave them at the mercy of men like President Wilkinson and the hungry Emperor. We can offer you the chance to find peace with yourselves in a world that needs you too sorely to let you go."

Reed Weston, who had been studying her while she talked as if she were

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some strange new species, blinked rapidly and shook his head as if to clear it of fuddlement. His voice, when it came, was arrogant in its dryness.

"And just how, Miss Marriner, are you proposing to show me a way to put this mad world at peace?" he said. "Against the disintegrators our weapons are worthless. No one can reach within a thousand yards of them—nothing can remain organically existent within a thousand yards of their intense heat. And nothing can prevent them from getting within a thousand yards of us."

"I have seen their weapon," said Marshal Henry quietly, and a sudden spark of hope lit up Mack's usually doubting eyes.

"We've got the hole in your inventory," he said with conviction that covered his malapropism. "You must have some idea of who sent us and why and where we're from."

"I do," said Reed Weston, and for the first time uncertainty showed itself in both voice and manner. "I was—informed of your journey and your purpose." He stopped, lowered his head, then lifted it to reveal his lumpy breadth of brow. "Otherwise would I be listening to you at all at a moment like this? But I fear you have arrived too late—forty-eight hours too late. The use of the disintegratory, which you, Miss Marriner, yourself saw, should convince you of this."

"But we have your way out," said Mack.

"We *have* a way out," said Reed Weston. "The most brilliant and experienced brains of Earth have already agreed with me that it is the only way out."

"You won't be alone on Mars long," said Elspeth. "We saw your ship when we flew in here today. We saw quarters for hundreds, perhaps thousands of men around it. We saw hundreds of men working on the ship itself.

"When you and your eminent friends take off for the distances of space forever and leave them behind to face the wrath of a government that has already convicted them of treason—do you think that they will refuse to practise again the craft you have taught them?"

"But—" began Reed Weston, frowning. Elspeth, however, was not then to be denied.

"Do you think," she went on, "that when their world topples and the men and women who gave them hope and leadership have deserted them, they will refuse to work for their new masters—especially when it will be 'work or starve' or 'work or die'?"

She felt a certain detached amazement at the sound of her own voice but there were still words to say, phrases to make, ideas to express. Thrusting aside self-amazement, she continued to speak.

"Do you think, Reed Weston, that you will be regarded as an object of faith or honor by the men and women you have deserted in their hour of greatest need? Can you answer this question?"

"It is a difficult decision—a very difficult one," said Reed Weston. "We have made up our minds that it is better to begin afresh on a new planet with a world where men and women can be free to work and live and think and breathe and love as they should, rather than go down to common ruin on this one."

"And how *should* men and women work and live and think and breathe and love?" Elspeth asked him. "As they can, as they must, as they do—or by some theory thought out in comfort and security, a theory suitable perhaps to a few selected souls. Do you think your children, if you have enough to win a planet, will all fit so neatly into a set of pigeonholes? Nonsense!

"Furthermore, the world will follow you. Out of those thousand who worked on the *Mars*, who put it together piece by piece, there must be hundreds—scores at least—who could put such a ship together without your guidance now that they have built one. And even if there are not—men have built it and will be able to build it again. No, you will be followed. There is no escape,

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even in space. Your tight little world is a myth! Face it."

"Bravo!" said a soft feminine voice from somewhere to one side of the room. "Bravo, Elspeth, that was terrific!"

Startled, Elspeth looked around at the source of the voice. A tiny youthful woman stood just inside the door, carrying a sealed message in one hand. She was modestly, even demurely dressed in dark skirt and crisp white blouse, her dark red hair groomed neatly in an inconspicuous roll at the nape of her neck.

But no demureness of costume could hide the curves of her figure, no unspectacularity of hair-do deny the soft enchantment of her features. If Elspeth needed anything else for recognition, the gleam that lit in Mack's eyes would have been enough.

"Juana!" she said, honestly surprised and actually glad to see someone from her own world. "Where on Earth did you come from?"

IX

MACK, of course, was sunk. Elspeth needed but one quick sidelong glance at him to see that he was vibrating almost visibly to Juana's presence—also that the girl, while overtly ignoring the photographer, was doing considerable vibrating of her own. Elspeth was snapped back into focus by Reed Weston.

"Words!" he exclaimed, regarding her with a sardonic expression. "Perhaps you have a device which makes Earth-flight no problem. But one such device is a far cry from a counter-agent to the creeping dry rot which has closed this world to honor and is attempting to do the same to creative thought. Nor will it stop the disintegration."

Elspeth glanced again at Mack and saw that she could scarcely expect help from him at the moment. She hated just then not only Mack and Juana but Mr. Horelle, who must have been responsible for the lush little brunette's presence in Norman at that moment.

"At least," she said to Reed Weston, "I think you ought to take a look at the Pipit—at our machine—before you discard its possibilities. We have had a long and hard journey."

"I don't mean to be rude," said Weston and for the first time he smiled. It was a quick nervous lip effort but it served to reveal to Elspeth some of the magnetism that had made him a leader in this alien world.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "we are working under a sword of Damocles whose thread is even now almost frayed through. Time is rapidly running out. Already the Columbian Army is moving toward the border from Brownsville to Ventura—and already the Imperial forces are gathering to meet it. War may break out at any minute."

He paced the carpet, swung to face her, went on. "When it does, our period of grace will be over. Columbia, whatever else it may be, is a mighty country. It has other armies encircling our few strongholds here in the rebel area. Its agents have been planting their subversive seeds for months among our people—and they can tap a treasury we cannot hope to match. No, we must leave this country, this Earth, at the first possible moment."

"But, Mr. Weston." Juana, surprisingly, was speaking in her soft tones. "I do think, if only as a favor to me, you should at least look at this machine of Mr. Fraser and Miss Marriner."

"You do, Juana?" Weston's expression softened as he looked at his secretary. He shook his head at her, added, "You know, my dear, you are something of a mystery to me. My instincts tell me I should not listen to you. After all, I know little of you. But if you say so, I'll do it."

Elspeth received an unashamed inner lift from the jealous resentment that flamed quickly in the heavy-lidded eyes of Mack Fraser. But Marshal Henry, who had remained in the background during most of the argument, now stepped forward once more.

"I can vouch for the—Pipit," he said

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with his quiet force. "Remember, I saw it in operation only yesterday morning."

"Only yesterday—it seems ages," said Elspeth irrelevantly. Reed Weston regarded her blankly, then suggested that they look the Pipit over at once. They all filed from the office, Weston leading with short brisk steps, Marshal Henry and Elspeth on his heels, the bemused Mack and Juana bringing up the rear.

The Pipit, looking innocently Earthbound, sat by itself in the midst of a sparsely populated gravel parking lot. Reed Weston, his hands clasped behind him, marched around it, surveying it as if it were a meteor on his front lawn.

"You mean to say this—*flies?*" he asked unbelievingly.

"Oh, quite," said Elspeth. She punched Mack in the back and nodded toward the driver's seat. He came to with a start, regarded her resentfully, then got the idea and climbed in behind the wheel. Elspeth looked at Marshal Henry.

"I'd like to try it," he said. Juana, to Elspeth's annoyance, said likewise and both of them got in, leaving her with Weston.

He was studying the Pipit with a scowl. "It doesn't seem possible," he muttered. Mack started the motor, and the rebel leader darted forward and lifted the hood, regarding the engine within for a long moment. Then he shut and locked it and stepped back, motioned for Mack to go ahead.

Mack ran it for a hundred and fifty feet, picking up speed, then extended the wings and took the Pipit up sharply from the ground. Reed Weston watched him, his frown gone, his eyes popping, his mouth half open in sheer surprise, as Mack proceeded to put the Pipit through her paces.

ELSPETH felt different. "The crazy fool—the crazy damn fool!" she muttered, drawing an annoyed glance from the rebel leader. She knew what the photographer was doing—he was showing off, not for the benefit of Reed Weston and Marshal Henry but for Juana. She only hoped he wouldn't crack up and wreck the demonstration. At the moment she didn't care whether or not its passengers survived a crash. In fact, she rather hoped for the reverse.

But Mack, after a five-minute flight, brought the little car-plane in easily, retracted its wings and pulled to a gentle stop directly in front of Reed Weston. At once the rebel leader was wrenching at the door handle and climbing into the vehicle.

This time Elspeth watched with Marshal Henry beside her. He looked rather gray beneath the dark skin of his face and he shook his head slightly as the Pipit took off once more.

"It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen," he murmured. "Think of it—an automobile that can fly—and is easily handled. Miss Marriner, I think you have saved a hemisphere—perhaps a world. What fuel do you say your—Pipit uses?"

She told him that it flew on ordinary kerosene, like most of the non-jet vehicles in this alien world. He listened attentively but kept one eye on the Pipit while it was in the air. He was palpably relieved when it brought Reed Weston down safely.

"What do you think?" the Marshal asked his chief as the latter emerged from the little vehicle.

"Think!" cried the Rebel leader, his face aglow with a grin that threatened literally to split his cheeks. *"Think?* With this wonderful craft we have Columbia, the Empire, the World itself in our hands. Miss Marriner, I apologize for doubting you just now." He bowed briefly over her hand. "I am now a fervent believer."

Mack climbed out then and assisted Juana from the Pipit—although, Elspeth thought uncharitably, the dark girl moved with the lithe strength and poise of a ballet dancer or perhaps a female hockey player.

But he had little more time with

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Juana that day. Reed Weston was on top of him from then on—Weston and a small corps of hastily summoned engineers and other experts. The photographer needed all his knowledge of machinery to explain to them the principles upon which the Pipit was built and functioned.

Somewhat to her surprise Elspeth found herself lunching in a woman's commissary with the glamorous Juana. Even more startling—and annoying—was the fact that she could not help liking the little brunette.

"Perhaps," Juana said bluntly over an excellent charlotte russe, "we aren't very discreet about romance. But we have so little time for it we have to grab what we can. I shouldn't have let Mack lead me on or vice versa"—she dimpled charmingly and mischievously as she said this—"if it hadn't been plain that you and he were so poorly suited for one another."

"Just a moment," said Elspeth, catching her breath and wits. "When you say 'we' I take it you're putting me sort of on the same team with yourself—with Mack also in the lineup?"

"But of course!" exclaimed the dark girl, looking surprised. "There is no road back once you're in it—even if you want one, which I cannot believe. Mr. Horelle would not have summoned you unless you were with us. After all it *is* the most important and exciting work in all the worlds."

It was on the tip of Elspeth's tongue to say that Mr. Horelle had not "summoned" Mack and herself but she thought better of the remark in time. After all, she still had but a small idea of what forces could have been at work, were still at work where she and Mack and—yes, Juana—were concerned.

So she remarked instead, "And how long have you been doing this—sort of interworld hopping, Juana? You look awfully young."

"Oh, I'm older than I look—even if I'm not as old as you," said the dark girl ingenuously. Elspeth winced.

"Touché!" she said. "I suppose I asked for that."

"Did I say something wrong?" Juana asked naively. Then, as Elspeth counted slowly to ten, "I don't come from this world, of course—*or* the world you come from. Mine's in a bit of a mess, too. I got into this work through Tod—he was my fiancé."

"*Was?*" Elspeth inquired, finding it difficult to associate any sort of tragedy with a person as young, as vibrantly alive, as comely as Juana.

"Yes, Tod was called for this sort of work right after he got through college. We were going to be married but—well, he wasn't lucky. I was determined to find out what happened to him and bring whoever killed him to justice—oh, I was all ready to call in the cops, the G-men—everything."

"Yes?" said Elspeth, faintly puzzled. "I guess Mr. Horelle was afraid I might upset the balance—you know, 'never underestimate the power of a woman'—so he had me brought to Spindrift Isle and explained what had happened to Tod and what the work was. He had a letter from Tod, a letter asking me to carry on for him if I didn't want to find another man to settle down with in my own world."

"He must have been quite a fellow, your Tod," said Elspeth.

JUANA nodded and her eyes filled unexpectedly. "Oh, he was—so much so that I've never found another man I wanted to marry on any of the worlds I've visited," she said. She laughed a little and tossed back her long dark red hair. "But I have my share of fun—and I really feel as if I'm doing something. It isn't a chance many girls get—or many men either."

"You're quite a girl yourself, Juana," said Elspeth.

"But I'm not really," the brunette replied earnestly. "I just run errands and fill in and entertain visiting firemen. I have no real gifts—like yours for poetry."

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ELSPETH thought that Juana had more gifts than she realized but forebore saying so. Instead she had coffee with the other-world girl and then went back with her to Marshal Henry's office. The Marshal smiled up from the papers at which he was working behind his big desk as she entered.

"Miss Marriner," he said, rising and motioning her to a chair. "You and I seem to be deputed to do some negotiating. Mr. Weston has left the matter to me, and your Mr. Fraser is going to be very busy this afternoon. He informed me that you were qualified to handle things. You know time is of the proverbial essence."

If the huge marshal had not modified the cliché with the word "proverbial" Elspeth might have graded him lower as a person—until he spoke she had been wrapped up in and a little befuddled by her absorption in her emotional life, in the strange new existence that had opened up for her since she had been given the Hatteras Keys assignment by Orrin Lewis less than a scant week before.

She looked at him then, all at once aware of him as a man, a man of wisdom and bigness and gentleness and humor who had overcome the stigma of a black skin in a white man's world, who had risen to immense estate which he was smilingly sacrificing for an ideal. She smiled back at him, then frowned.

"But, Marshal Henry, we have nothing to negotiate. We came here to turn the Pipit over to Reed Weston."

He rose, towering above her from behind the desk, ran a big hand through his wiry curly white hair. "I don't mean to be dense," he told her, "but I don't understand. You and Mr. Fraser have come here at very considerable risk. You have brought with you a device that is little short of a miracle—a device that may enable us to fulfill all our ideas as well as bring peace to Columbia. And you say there is nothing to negotiate.... Miss *Marriner!*"

His voice sharpened, bringing her out of the reverie that had overcome her. It was, she thought, the Afro-American music of his voice, the rhythm of his every move, the—

She had begun instinctively to put her thoughts into poetic phrasing, to seek the liquid meter that would fit the marshal, would be part of this ebony demigod, would put his essence—that word again—into singing lines. But for some reason words were failing her when the marshal's use of her name woke her up.

"Are you ill?" he inquired, reaching for the water carafe in front of him. "Shall I send out for a drink?"

"No," she said a trifle breathlessly. "No—I'm all right. I have a bad habit of wandering when what passes for my mind gets to working. You see, Marshal, I'm a poet."

"Which is extremely interesting," he informed her with a dryness that was somehow not unsympathetic, "but doesn't get us a bit further with our negotiation. Surely you must expect something. After all, you may merely have won us a war—and a peace."

"I'm sorry," she said and she knew the warmth that crept through her was dangerous. "We were sent here to deliver the Pipit and to await new orders. We were not told to demand a price."

"You *are* unwordly, Miss Marriner," he said, regarding her solemnly as if he half-expected her to vanish where she sat. His smile reappeared. "But I think I like you very much."

She had dinner with him that night and they drove out in one of his huge rocket cars to look at the immense and graceful spire of the space-ship, gleaming like some silver needle in the moonlight. Its vastness, larger than anything mobile in her experience, made her wonder at the genius of its creators.

"Almost," she told the marshal, "it makes me wish we had not broken in today to change Reed Weston's plan—his dream."

"His dream was already shattered or he would not have conceived such a plan," Marshal Henry told her. "Your

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arrival was the operation of Fate if ever I saw it."

"You must have had some inkling of who we were—of our coming," she said softly. "When you spoke to us in the hotel lift the night before last, when you helped us to escape, when you smiled at us on the hotel balcony in New Orleans."

"If you'll forgive a supposely responsible man for being a damned fool," he replied, his voice low, "I'm afraid it was you."

"Oh my dear!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Oh my dear!"

She slept alone that night in a small room in one of the buildings that made up the Reed Weston Headquarters. As she dozed off she realized happily that she had not thought of Mack and Juana since being taken to the marshal's office after lunch with the little brunette.

WITH the coming of the next morning events moved swiftly in Columbia—and Reed Weston's Norman Headquarters was the focal point. There were rapid exchanges of messengers, not only with other detachments of his own rebel forces but with Columbian and Imperial leaders. It was a time of mounting excitement.

Elspeth saw little of Mack. He seemed to be incessantly tied up either with technicians or Juana, who continued to play a silent but omnipresent role in the background. She was present, however, by request of Marshal Henry, at meetings with both Columbian and Imperialist deputies, who wished to know something of the qualities and uses of the Pipit.

It was Marshal Henry who took over both meetings when the officials had finished questioning her. "Miss Marriner," he told them, "has given you some idea of the Pipit's uses as a means of peaceful transport. You will shortly see a demonstration of its possibilities in these lines for yourselves.

"Our engineers, already engaged in preparing its manufacture on a larger scale than anything we have yet attempted, will show you estimates which will prove that this flying marvel can be made at a price far below that of existing ground locomotion.

"It is my especial job to warn you that the Pipit's war uses are potentially even more effective. Armed with rocket weapons it can swoop down upon any desired point from above. It can destroy and escape unharmed and you have no weapons to stop it.

"Orders have been issued," he concluded grimly, "to send the Pipit so armed to destroy the headquarters and headquarters personnel of either Columbian or Imperialist forces which again employ the illegal disintegrator—and rest assured we have agents who will quickly inform us of the use of that weapon. Now, gentlemen, if you will follow me—"

When he had finished with the last of them and they had departed for their bases, a quiet, thoughtful and shaken group of men, Marshal Henry turned to Elspeth with a sudden smile and said, "Did I sound too preachy, Elly—do you think I put it over?"

"You were wonderful, Johnny," she told him honestly. "Now what do we do?"

The lines in his face deepened. "From now on all we can do is wait and keep on learning how to manufacture Pipits—and pray."

"You sound as if you're worried," Elspeth said with concern.

"I am—scared stiff," he admitted. "Actually, if the Empire and Columbian ministers are not overwhelmed by the thought of the Pipit, the very best we can hope for is a stalemate—and that's not good enough."

"Why—what can go wrong?" Elspeth asked anxiously.

"The disintgrator," he replied grimly. "It will still be effective—and against people in Pipits as anywhere else. We have no way of screening it out. We can drop bombs, of course, from a safe height—but within a thousand yards in any direction we are still vulnerable."

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"Glory!" said the poet, her optimism evaporating. "I never thought of that."

"To date, neither have they," said the marshal in quiet tones. "But they will—and then we won't have things so easy, mark my words." He shook his great head, sighed and rose, adding, "But there's nothing we can do just now—and I know a very pleasant place where we can dine not far from here."

X

THREE more weeks went by while the negotiations dragged on inconclusively. For Elspeth these weeks were oddly dreamlike in essence, yet oddly satisfying. Whether the emotion she felt for Marshal John Henry was love or not she did not stop to analyze. Whatever it was, it pervaded her, filled her days and nights with an excitement her inner being had not felt since her first schoolgirl crush. And there was always the added stimulus of great events.

Never in her comparatively obscure life on her own prosaic world had Elspeth known the glamour of importance. There she had been merely a girl—moderately attractive yet a bit odd because of her poetic leanings, a bit repellent to most men because of her intelligence.

Here and now, thanks to Mr. Horelle, she was at the core of a bloodless revolution that was changing the face and fate of a world. She sat in on meetings with great scientists, with ambassadors, with leading men of arms. She was consulted on serious questions, and her words were listened to keenly.

She and Mack were folk of mystery, of origins they could not reveal but of resources which commanded respect. She continued to see little of Mack, of course. He had taken over the task of enabling the Weston engineers to tool up for Pipit manufacture, to prepare a few hand-built models.

She saw Juana more often, of course—since the dark girl was now Marshal Henry's secretary. She came to like her increasingly, especially since her own emotions were no longer directed toward Mack. But some things about her erstwhile rival puzzled her.

For instance, when she and the marshal had been out late one moonswept evening, Elspeth returned to her room to find Juana sitting in the only armchair and smoking a cigarette. The brunette regarded her quizzically—and with something else.

"You've been out with my boss again," she said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Right," Elspeth said dreamily. She kicked off her shoes and lay on the bed, linking fingers at the back of her neck. "I think he's simply perfect—he's so big and so humble, so strong and so gentle, so slow of speech, yet so fast of thought."

"He's all those things," the girl said. "But, Elly, be careful. You can't stay in this world much longer and if you let yourself get emotionally involved you may impair your usefulness."

Elspeth regarded her uninvited guest and sensed trouble behind the limpid dark eyes. With a spark of intuition she said, "It isn't just that, Juana. There's something else, isn't there?"

"Of course there is," the dark girl replied. "I feel like a crumb to say this, Elly—but dammit he's a Negro."

"Somehow I never suspected you of *that*," said Elspeth, surprised and more than a little shocked. The idea of such cheap prejudice in anyone connected with the incredibly wise Mr. Horelle had never occurred to her. She felt angry, almost ill.

"You're wrong—what you're thinking about me, Elly," Juana said hotly. "There are some worlds where color doesn't matter—but this isn't one of them. Nor is yours—nor mine, heaven knows."

"Then it's time something was done," said Elspeth sharply.

"If you only knew how hard we have worked for it!" the dark redhead cried. "On world after world after world—even long before Mr. Horelle had charge. But progress is so slow. That's why I

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stuck my own hot little neck out and tried to warn you. Elly, you look like a girl who's falling in love—and you mustn't."

"I'm sorry I misjudged you," said Elspeth. She sat up and reached for a cigarette, gave another to Juana. The sincerity in that lovely voluptuous little face was unmistakable. As she inhaled, she was able to see herself as this girl must see her, as Mack— But she told herself she didn't give a damn about Mack or what Mack thought. He had no business having opinions of her.

"Perhaps," Elspeth went on slowly, "I'm in love with an idea rather than a man. But you'll have to admit he *is* gorgeous."

"Strictly for the birds," said Juana and they both grinned. Had they been a bit younger they would have giggled. A few mintues later, when the cigarettes were finished, Juana rose to leave. At the door she said, "Have your fun, Elly —you've a right to it—but don't let the current carry you off. You're needed."

Elspeth nodded and frowned at the closing door. She felt all at once a little begrimed. Falling in love had always come as easily to her as breathing. At various times she had oozed emotion over a math teacher (she hated figures), a pimply delivery boy, a small bird that had nested in a tree outside her window, a lady athletic coach at school, a Canadian lacrosse professional, a writer with a long pink goatee, a famous actress.

But love itself was something that had not come easily—it had not come at all as yet. Within herself she had always reserved an indefinable something, a something which she had never intended to give until she knew herself to be honestly and irretrievably a lover—a beloved lover.

SHE thought, a little bitterly, that she had undoubtedly been the worst sort of a triple fool to have so withheld herself. But even as she uttered this silent condemnation she knew that it was as much a part of her as her eyelashes. It was something she could not help, something she would never be able to change.

Yet Juana had done one thing for her. The little dark girl had showed her that her current emotional unheaval was not the real one for which she had waited so long. She *was* infatuated—but with the idea of Marshal Henry rather than with the man himself.

She stripped off her clothes quickly and crept naked between the coarse linen sheets of her bed, turned out the light. Somehow the rough cloth, instead of the silk of her nightgown against her skin, helped to salve a sorely torn conscience.

Being unwordly and utterly honest, she looked for a chance to tell Marshal Henry the truth about her feelings the next day. But the marshal was not there. He had taken off hurriedly in an effort to end delay on the Mexican treaty at Brownsville.

He left a little note with his regrets, a note that said:

Elly—If I could think of anything to compensate for the loss of your presence—a flower, a jewel, a bit of verse—I should have left it with this note.
Unfortunately, my dear, I can think of nothing but you. So be patient until my return. Times shall not always be so difficult for such as we.

He signed it simply with his name. Elspeth looked at it and then at Juana, who had handed her the note. Impulsively she gave it to the girl to read. Juana read it twice, handed it back without a word. But her huge dark eyes were suspiciously liquid.

"You may not see him again as soon as you both expect, Elly," the dark redhead said quietly.

Feeling utterly useless, Elspeth got one of the official drivers to take her to where Mack was working. To her surprise she was driven past the long factory shed where the Pipits were in process of manufacture to the larger plant surrounding the rocket-launching field. "He's over there," her driver informed her, stopping.

Mack, his face tanned, one cheek grimy, sleeves rolled up, was frowning over a set of complex blueprints in a

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sort of steel shed which adjoined the rocket-launching platform. Surrounding him were a number of leathery looking engineers.

"Hi, Elly," he greeted her, and once more she was surprised at the unexpected charm of his grin. He seemed genuinely glad to see her. He looked, she thought, a little tired and she had an unaccountable and wholly maternal desire to chide him for not taking better care of himself.

Then he was beside her, his brawny arm inside hers, introducing her to the others, "Elly's slumming," he said.

"I am not," she replied with dismal lack of wit. "I've—well, I've been rather busy myself."

"That we know," said Mack, mocking but not jeering. He drew her apart with a nod of apology to the others, walked her out onto the great flat launching field. "We're just about washed up here, Elly—you, Juana and I. I just got word from her that we may take off on another mission tonight. I've just about got these space-ship plans pat now. It's a good thing I've done a bit of engineering in my day. Some of the techniques these chaps have are appallingly advanced. I've been wading over my head for two weeks."

"Washed up—what do you mean?" Elly asked him, startled. "Are we going back to Spindrift Island and Mr. Horelle?"

"Eventually," said Mack quietly. "Juana's getting the cues. But I think we're visiting another world first. It seems our assignment here fits into a situation there."

"Lord!" said Elly inelegantly. This took a bit of getting used to. She was not at all certain that she could stand the various wrenches and upheavals involved in adjustment to still another version of Earth—to say nothing of playing an active part in one of its crises.

Then she looked at Mack, saw his serene readiness, recalled that their roles had been reversed. It was she who had embarked upon the expedition readily, light-heartedly, while Mack had had difficulty in fitting himself to the parallel time track theorem.

All at once she understood why Juana had visited her the night before, had warned her not to get in too deep with the marshal, had skilfully pierced the fraudulent root of her love. She also sensed new meaning in the dark redhead's parting remark that morning. Her respect for the dark girl rose another notch.

"All right, Mack," she said, putting her hands into her jacket pockets. "When, where, how and why?"

"Juana has the facts," said Mack. "She got them this morning. We've got to get something from some other world to clean up our mission on this one."

"Just give me my cues," said Elspeth. "I think I'd better get back to what is laughingly called my lodgings and pack."

"Swell," said the engineer. "We may have to fly it in the Pipit. So don't let your poetic soul wander after a trick cloud formation or a flock of birds on the way. We don't want you missing at this stage of the game."

She looked hard at the lower part of his face, squinting a little. Mack blinked, fidgeted, finally said, "What's the matter? Is something wrong, Elly?"

"Your mouth," she replied. "It's far too big." With which she walked back to her car and driver, feeling quite well pleased with herself. At least she had made Mack drop the drafting compass he had held in his hand.

But in the car her thoughts became not so pleasant. So the assignment was going on and they were to travel into yet another version of Earth. She considered the how and why of it without constructive results. In the end she sighed and sat back against the cushions, closing her eyes.

Mack was going—Juana, of course, had seen to that. The big lug carried and fetched like some Saint Bernard dog at the little redhead's slightest flicker of

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desire. Yes, Mack, who had reacted in such ornery fashion to his entry into this Columbian world, was muzzled up and sitting on his hinder, paws in the air, all but pleading to be taken into some other alien existence—because the lush Juana flashed a smile in his direction.

Elspeth opened her eyes and said some very unladylike words—for she knew that she, too, was hooked inextricably in the interworld parade. It was, she thought, an unforeseen and dismal fate for a young lady who had once said, "Rabbit," for good luck before opening her eyes on the first day of each and every month.

That night the three of them took off from the Norman Headquarters in the Pipit—accompanied by a quiet young husky, who had been trained to operate the bifunctional little vehicle and was to fly it back.

"Where are we going?" Elspeth asked Juana, who seemed thoroughly at home in the air.

"We're picking up a train at Natchez," the dark redhead told her. "I'll brief you later on our assignment." She turned her eyes meaningfully toward the back seat, where the young husky sat, implying she did not wish to talk further in his presence.

Thus reproved, Elspeth kept half-resentful silence. She had an unpleasant feeling of being out of things, of being the merest of pawns. But there was nothing she could do about it at the moment—so she kept quiet while Mack brought the Pipit down on a highway north of their destination and drove it over a stretch of bumpy highway and through a night-dark Natchez to the vast ornate barn of the railroad station.

XI

ELSPETH did not awake until the rocket-drawn special train was slowing to a jerky stop at St. Louis. She rolled over in her bed, flung out an arm and struck the wall of the compartment beside her. This restored her to full consciousness and she sat up, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

The train did another stop-start, all but tossing her against the wall. Apparently, while a rocket drive could get under way smoothly, braking was another matter. She looked through the small round window by the head of her bunk, saw that they were in fact coming into a city. It was bright sunlight outside and the watch on her wrist informed her that it was almost noon.

They had barely made the train, which was awaiting them in the Natchez station, had been hurriedly bundled aboard its rearmost indigo car, a car which, Juana informed them, was to be theirs during the rest of their brief stay in the Columbian world.

At that moment Elspeth had hated the smaller, darker girl. She seemed as gay and high spirited as a child getting on a vacation express after a term of boarding school. Mack had been hot and tired and a trifle grumpy; and as for herself, Elspeth felt thoroughly wilted inside and out. An involuntary glimpse of herself in a station concourse mirror had not raised her morale. She looked, she had discovered, at least as badly as she felt.

"Let's take the last three staterooms," Juana suggested as a white porter ushered them into the ornate car. The front two-thirds were taken up with staterooms lined neatly in a row; the final third was a combined observation lounge and buffet. The decor was elaborately lush but charming, with much lacy mahogany grillework and gold leaf.

"This is Finance Minister Alston's own private car," the steward informed them in a rich Southern accent as he stowed their belongings in their rooms. He seemed singularly proud of the fact.

Mack, Elspeth noticed, refused to give up a heavy looking leather briefcase, even kept it stowed between his feet when they adjourned to the lounge for a nightcap after the train had started. She wondered vaguely what was in it but was too tired to ask.

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"What makes you so gay?" she inquired bluntly of Juana after a yawn.

"We're going to *my* world," the girl replied, sparkling over her highball.

"What's it like?" inquired Mack, looking interested.

Juana merely laughed. "You'll find out soon enough, dear ones."

"When do we make the—change or whatever it is?" Mack asked.

"We transfer at the next tangential point," Juana told him. "It's somewhere in Kansas—close to Topeka. The cyclones have something to do with it."

"That's right," mused Mack. "Come to think of it Hatteras is a storm center too."

"If you lovely people will excuse me," said Elspeth, yawning again, "I'm going to turn in. I'm a wreck and I know it."

Their good nights had been casual and sensing herself more unwanted than ever, Elspeth had retired to her stateroom, determined not to sleep. Feeling like the original fifth wheel, she decided to relive every moment she had spent with the black marshal. She had got as far as the New Orleans balcony episode when slumber ambushed her neatly.

Now they were coming into a city—she caught sight of a large signboard advertising a St. Louis beer and realized where they were. Their car was due to be shunted onto the rear of another train here, a train bound for California. She decided to get up and see what was going on. Also, she was hungry.

MACK and Juana were already in the lounge—Mack in his robe, Juana in a breath-taking negligee—when Elspeth, feeling about one-third groomed, emerged from her stateroom fully dressed. There were appetizing aromas of bacon and coffee in the air and the steward-porter, whose name was Soames, greeted her with a smile.

"Hi, you people," Elspeth said to all of them indiscriminately. "You look disgustingly well-fed and happy." She noted that Mack still had the briefcase with him. It aroused her curiosity.

"May I fix you some breakfast, Miss Marriner?" Soames inquired politely. Elspeth shook her head.

"No breakfast," she told him at the bidding of her stomach. "What can you fix in the way of a full meal?"

What Soames fixed in his shining copper little kitchenette was quite miraculous. There was first a thick hot soup on a beef-and-chicken base which was unlike anything in her memory but was delicious. He followed this with a thick and tender small steak, soufflé potatoes, asparagus hollandaise, a tossed green salad and zabaglione, along with a café royale for a finisher.

"These poets with their ethereal appetites!" murmured Mack as Elspeth finished the last of her salad and Soames removed it in favor of the zabaglione, which he spooned from a small tureen.

"Quiet—can't you see this woman is hungry?" said Juana.

Elspeth took three spoonfuls of her zabaglione and realized that, although it was incredibly good, she could eat no more. She explained to Soames and, when the others turned her down, asked him to put it in her stateroom. "I'm not going to let it get away," she told the steward, who grinned and removed it.

She sat back and lit a cigarette and then sipped her café royale. Mack said assiduously, "Are you sure you wouldn't rather have a large black cigar?"

"Mack, stop being unkind," said Juana sharply.

"That's the only Mack I know," Elspeth told her. She transferred her attention to the photographer. "Incidentally, are you attached to that briefcase by an umbilical cord or what?"

"Oh!" Mack looked briefly abashed. Then, "I'm not supposed to let this out of my touch," he explained. "It's got the spaceship plans and a sample of the fuel Weston invented. It seems he has some atomic racket our next world is going to need."

"Incidentally, friends," said Juana, sitting up straight and pulling her per-

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fect legs up under her, "since we're already on our way across Missouri I might as well give you an idea of what's ahead."

THEY settled themselves and the dark readhead went on. "In the first place my particular world is in a jam that makes this little Columbia-Mexico trouble look like a game of badminton. There are two whole sets of wars in the making—not wars involving mere nations or hemispheres but the entire world. It has happened before and we've pulled through—but this time it may mean the end of civilization everywhere."

"Nice people you come from," said Mack, pursing his lips.

"Shut up," said Juana. "It isn't the people's fault. It isn't their leaders either. What happened—unlike this world we are leaving—is that our science went galloping so far ahead of our culture that it upset the entire balance. It enabled world population to triple in three generations, and that didn't help.

"The result is chaos, except in the Western Hemisphere. Asia, of course, is the big threat. They have the hundreds of millions and the ancient ideas—although they have put new clothes on them. At the moment they are stopped in Europe—but they have simply transferred their attentions to the Orient.

"China, Malaya and Indonesia have fallen into the lap of their dictator. Japan and India are in ferment. Their dictator offers the usual revolutionary panacea to the so-called common man, then turns him into a slave to his system. It's older than the pyramids."

"And how does our space-ship help?" Elspeth inquired.

"Hold your ponies," said Juana pertly. "I'm coming to it. The President of the United States—he's the third Roosevelt to hold office—has called a conference of the so-called Atlantic Powers and South America in San Francisco to increase their awareness of the menace to freedom in Asia.

"It's not going to be successful. The European nations are concerned only with their own front yard and South America is resentful because North America has focused its attention and money on Europe. Something is needed to shock the world, to offer it a possible way out from its overpopulation dilemma."

"I begin to understand," said Elspeth. "Space flight."

"Exactly," Juana replied. "It is our job to put the contents of Mack's briefcase into the hands of the President of the United States himself—and to see that he realizes its value. In return, we are to get a shield for the Columbian disintegrator the Watchers have learned my world has."

"That sounds like quite a package—if he's tangled up in this conference and everything," said Mack, looking troubled.

"It is—but not impossible," Juana replied with quiet confidence. "There is a plan, of course. President Roosevelt happens to be extremely devoted to his daughter—and his daughter is intensely ambitious in a literary way. In short, she wants to be a poet." Juana's eyes came to rest upon Elspeth.

"I don't understand!" exclaimed the latter, feeling a sudden sense of panic. "How is her wanting to be a poet going to—"

"It will," said Juana, smiling. "You see, you are going to enter San Francisco as an extremely *avant garde* English poetess. Don't worry—that's all arranged." She nodded toward a table and said, "We have even had some of your poems published by an English house in this world of mine we're about to enter."

"But it's impossible!" gasped Elspeth. She rose lifted the book from the table, leafed through it. Incredibly, although paper and binding were of a type new to her, there were her verses, the slim little end-product of so many hours and days and months and years of soul-searching work.

She glimpsed the contents page, felt sudden nostalgia quicken within her

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at sight of the titles—*My Love is Yesterday, Luisa, Irish Sea, The Slender Wing* and all the others. All at once she was no longer in this alien train, speeding toward an alien destination on an alien world.

She was back with a black-haired young ruffian named Kevin, who had made violent love to her on a windy afternoon in a ruined castle keep overlooking St. George's Channel. She was again regarding the flight of a swift gray-blue swallow as it darted amid the spires and chimney tops of a green-and-white New England town. She was back amid an incredible cluster of brilliant—

Mack whistled, said, "Come out of it, Elly."

She did, laid down the book, smiled her apology to Juana, who smiled faintly back. "I'm sorry," she told them. "But seeing my work brought back memories and I lost myself in them."

"You're fortunate to be able to dream," said the dark girl, drawing an incredulous look from the practical Mack. Then Juana went on with her briefing. "You'll be interviewed by the newspapers within an hour of your arrival. From the moment the story appears things will take care of themselves."

"And what about you two?" Elspeth inquired.

Juana laughed. "We're your entourage," she explained. "I'm your personal attendant—take care of all the mundane details your poetic soul can't abide to handle, as for Mack—" she sent a sidelong glance at the photographer—"he's going to be your personal secretary. It seems you can't abide to work with women. Incidentally we travel with you everywhere."

"Just a moment," said Mack, his face red beneath its tan. "Do you mean I have to traipse around as Elly's personal stooge? Why, not only am I nobody's secretary but I don't know the—"

"Mack," Juana interrupted him calmly, "Elly is our one direct contact with President Roosevelt. She's the star of this act—and can you think of a better excuse for lugging that briefcase with you everywhere than to be a poet's secretary?"

Mack muttered volcanically, then subsided. Finally he said, "But when this President Roosevelt of yours gets this space-flight data, what's he going to do with it?"

"It will make America the real hope of the world," Juana replied. "It will make my people the only ones who can offer humanity salvation."

"Why don't the idiots try birth control?" said Mack.

"Emotionally and religiously they simply aren't geared to it," said the dark girl. "That's their greatest tragedy."

They continued to discuss the assignment as the rocket train sped across the plains of Missouri. Finally they played cards, had cocktails and dinner. They had barely finished their meal when they passed through Kansas City and over into Kansas.

"This thing makes time," Mack remarked.

"She can do almost two hundred over a flat stretch like this one," Soames informed them as he placed inviting looking fruit compotes before them. "She's only slow up the river."

After dinner, at Juana's suggestion, Elspeth read some of Christine Roosevelt's poems. They were, as she had expected, neither good nor bad—typical verses by an intelligent, well-bred, reasonably well-educated girl with a slight flair for rhyme.

If the President's daughter had ever felt an unorthodox emotion there was no evidence of it in her neatly-scanned iambic, trochaic or anapestic lines. This, Elspeth sensed, was a well disciplined young lady—and both discipline and lady-ism were, to her, the sworn enemies of the true poet.

She wondered how on Earth—whatever Earth she was on—she was going to find anything kind to say about such uplifted doggerel. She would have to concentrate upon being nice about a

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turn of phrase here and there. In toto, Christine Roosevelt's verse was extremely inconsequential. It wasn't even bad—or anything else.

"I thought you'd find you had a job on your hands," said Juana, reading Elspeth's thoughts from an armchair on the other side of the deeply carpeted lounge. "Incidentally, Elly, I read your verse, too—and was impressed. You don't write crud."

"What a ghastly word—and thought!" said the poet, laughing in spite of herself. She tapped the book of verses by the president's daughter. "But as for this—I'll manage something."

"You can always call on your secretary to help you out," said Juana, her expression faultlessly grave.

"Quiet please," snapped Mack, "for the benefit of those who have expired." He lapsed into a somewhat dazed surliness that had been with him since Juana had told him what part he was to play in their forthcoming incursion into the dark redhead's world.

AS THE evening wore on Elspeth found herself puzzled by the relationship between Mack and Juana. Whatever it had been—and she knew it had been at least physically deep—it was strictly business now. She had an idea, from the way they were acting, that it was Juana who had slammed the door. Mack seemed pretty unhappy about it, too.

Serves the big tomcat right, she thought but, being woman and intrigued with the photographer despite herself, she could not restrain a faint sense of resentment at Juana for having so casually won and discarded him.

It was approaching midnight when the train once more went into the series of lurches that announced it was coming to a stop. Soames, the steward, appeared from somewhere, wearing an overcoat and carrying a small bag.

"I'm to leave you alone in the car when it's sidetracked and stay with the rest of the train?" he asked Juana.

She nodded. "Right, Soames, and thanks for taking such good care of us. You'll find the car all right when the train comes back to pick it up in"—she glanced at her wrist watch—"seventeen minutes. Good-by."

She handed the steward a bill of large denomination, and he bowed to all of them and moved forward through the corridor beside the staterooms. Juana's lips tightened and she shook herself as the train finally halted. "Transfer time," she said.

"What do we do?" Elspeth asked her.

"Relax," said Juana, managing it herself. "Don't ask me how it works. You've been through it once and you should know. Better make sure all your gear is there." She nodded toward their luggage, which Soames had piled at the front of the lounge. "The new car might be of different design forward and things might get lost."

Elspeth discovered her bag was missing and went to her stateroom to get it. As she opened the door she could look ahead to the front of the car, could see the receding rocket flares of what had been their train moving rapidly out of sight ahead. It gave her an odd lonely sensation.

She found her bag stuck in the washroom where she had left it, slung it over her shoulder. Then she noticed the silver tureen of zabaglione Soames had left for her. A taste of it, she thought, might help to settle the queasiness that had filled her stomach since the train began to slow down.

Elspeth lifted the silver lid and reached for the silver ladle within the bowl. Then she stood frozen, staring down at it. The bowl was empty.

It had not been scoured. There were traces of yellow foam clinging to its curved sides and to the spoon. There were similar traces on one of the three small dessert cups on the table beside it. Someone had eaten every bit of it.

Soames! she thought but it couldn't have been Soames. He'd have made more for himself had he wanted it. Mack

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might have done it but he professed an ardent dislike of all Italian cooking, from antipasto to café espresso. And somehow she knew Juana wouldn't.

"Like Goldilocks," she thought, "and the three bears." For the first time she wondered if Goldilocks had felt a fear that matched her own. Of course it was the bears who had been robbed and should have felt the fear but there were three of them.

With the thought she hurried from the stateroom and back along the corridor to the lounge. She wanted to tell them about it, to find if anyone of them knew more than herself. She had just passed the pile of luggage when the darkness came.

XII

IT COULD scarcely have lasted more than three or four minutes but Elspeth, out of physical contact with either Mack or Juana, and already shaken by her discovery in the stateroom, had to fight to keep her teeth from chattering. She stood perfectly still in the black void, wondering what cosmic changes were occurring about her, feeling cold sweat bead her forehead.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the darkness was gone. Mack was there, looking with a worried frown in her direction, as was Juana. In her relief at being able to see them once more and her excitement in her changed surroundings, she forgot completely the fears that had shaken her so severely moments before.

Gone were the gingerbread and gilt surroundings of Finance Minister Alston's private car. Instead they were in a severe modern lounge section of glass and steel and blond woods and severely "modern" but extremely comfortable furniture. Lighting was soft and indirect, and at the partition which divided observation lounge from stateroom section stood a curved satinwood bar, backed by a glittering array of glassware and bottles and a striking mural in sophisticated imitation of Navajo primitive.

"It's like a carrier landing," Juana said, exhaling in relief and lighting a cigarette with fingers that trembled slightly. "No matter how many times you make it safely you're always glad to get through it okay."

There were sounds of a train approaching, a jar as coupling was completed. Then, slowly, they began to move once more. In less than thirty seconds a white-coated ebony steward was coming toward them down the corridor, smiling and asking if they had any preferences as to which staterooms they wished him to make up for them.

"Wonder whose car this is?" Mack asked, looking about him with a speculative squint. "It certainly is a change."

"I believe it belongs to one of the members of a family named Vanderbilt," said Juana. "They're quite big stuff in this world—finance, sports, politics, the works."

"Ditto in ours," said Mack. "I never dreamed I'd be roughing it in a Vanderbilt private car."

They took rooms which corresponded to those they had had in Minister Alston's car. Elspeth found hers even more compact and comfortable and well arranged. She looked for and noted the absence of the omnipresent dental powder of the Columbian world. Alone in her room she thought with a quick pang of recurrent panic of the empty tureen of zabaglione.

Even the thought of that ornate sterling tureen, she decided, was anachronistic. It belonged, along with Reed Weston and John Henry and, yes—Everard van Hooten, in the world they had so recently left. As she went back to the lounge to rejoin Mack and Juana she wondered with a frown why she should have thought of the orchidaceous and deadly Everard at such a time.

The new steward, whose name was Marcus, proved as courteous an attendant and at least as able a drink mixer as Soames had been. Elspeth sipped a

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tall frosted rum drink and felt her tensions drain out of her. The transfer made to Juana's world, there was nothing to do but relax until they reached San Francisco. She and Mack questioned Juana about the world they were now in until the dark redhead smilingly begged off on the grounds of fatigue and departed for her stateroom and bed.

"She's an amazing little person," said Elspeth, looking after her and shaking her fair head.

"You can say that again," said Mack smugly. Elspeth felt a sudden desire to grab his hair with both hands and pull it out in clumps but she restrained the impulse.

Instead she said, "You don't seem to be doing so well yourself, sugar plum," and, picking up the two volumes of poetry, departed with what she hoped was haughty disdain for her stateroom.

She planned to study the work of Christine Roosevelt more deeply but the motion of the train was lulling and the rum drink had been more potent than its bland flavor had suggested. It was not long before she fell asleep, barely remembering to switch out the convenient little wall light at the head of her bunk.

As their train pulled into San Francisco late the following afternoon, Elspeth felt fed, rested and ready to face the new problems of a new world with excitement rather than fear. A glance at Mack showed her that he, too, was keyed for whatever lay ahead.

Despite his impassive countenance it was evident in the aggressive set of his shoulders, in the careful reserve of his motions as he studied the cut of the clothes he was wearing—they were not a perfect fit but they had a smart cold-weather look that would have been alien in the hot Columbian world.

Juana looked incredibly poised for a young woman returning to her own world after long absence, but unspoken emotion glowed in her large off-hazel eyes and she had been given to long periods of silence that increased during the final stages of the trip.

Elspeth was contemplating her appearance in a smartly cut dress of gray flannel with a diagonal white stripe and a soft-brimmed felt hat that put unexpected but rather attractive shadows around her eyes—furnished, like Mack's new garments and Juana's, by the generous owner of the car—when sudden sounds of violence forward brought her quickly to attention.

The train was just coming to a stop in the terminal and Marcus was ahead in the compartments, tending to their gear. There were unmistakable thuddings of hard blows, then an unpleasant noise that was half gurgle, half scream—quickly cut off.

"Hi-*yi!*" cried Mack, springing into motion and moving rapidly along the corridor in the direction of the fight. He reached the door of his stateroom, from which the sounds of struggle were coming, turned in to enter on the run.

ELSPETH did not clearly see what happened then. A fist emerged from the door, catching the onrushing photographer with impeccable precision right on the point of his chin. His head flew back so violently that Elspeth gasped, afraid his neck had been broken. Arms flailing, Mack reeled back across the corridor, filling it with his bulk.

As he did so a slimmer male figure darted out of the stateroom and raced away from them along the corridor. In view of the confusion he left in his wake it was impossible for either of the girls to get a clear view of even his back. And before they could reach Mack, who was leaning against the corridor wall, his eyes glassy, the interloper had already slammed the car door behind him.

By some miracle Mack was still holding his heavy briefcase, which he had carried with him in a sort of reflex action. He gave them an unrecognizing look, then began to fall forward. Elspeth pushed him back against the wall, holding him upright and trying absurdly to fan him with her handbag.

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Juana, who was carrying an unexpected but efficient looking little automatic pistol, darted into the compartment. Elspeth was about to yell for help when Mack began to regain consciousness and took an awkward half swing at her, knocking her hat out of line.

For some reason this made her furious. "You big baboon!" she shouted. "Can't you even stay out of the way of a fist."

"Hit me—when I wasn't lookin'," Mack mumbled. He tried to swing again at her but Elspeth brought her handbag hard against the side of his head. For some reason this seemed to clear it and he looked at her and blinked.

"What happened?" he asked stupidly. Elspeth stepped back, as he seemed steady on his feet, and Juana called from the stateroom. Marcus, it seemed was in worse trouble.

"It's too late to try a pursuit," she said calmly, holding the steward's head steady. Mack meekly helped to stretch him out on the bunk. "Whoever it was certainly laid it on."

Marcus was considerably messed up. Blood was welling from a two-inch cut under his right eye and his dark skin revealed other signs of battering. Using the towels and water in the stateroom, they managed to clean him up before his eyes opened.

"Dunno who it was," he said of his assailant when he was sufficiently recovered to answer questions. "I jes' come in here to see that Mister Mack's bags is ready when—*powie*—the lights go out."

"Did you get a look at him, Marcus?" Mack asked eagerly.

"All I know is he sure could hit," said the steward. "He like to have pulverized me." His face clouded. "I sure am sorry to have let it happen. I guess I wasn't doin' my job right."

"You were fine, Marcus," said Elspeth soothingly. "I'm sure whatever happened wasn't your fault. Now, if you're feeling better, let's forget all about it."

"I'll be all right," said Marcus. Juana, who was looking increasingly unhappy, gave him a large bill—this time of a new type of money—and they went on about their business. Mack was nursing a knot on his chin but was otherwise intact physically. His pride had suffered more than his jaw.

Juana handled their affairs brusquely, telling a trio of reporters who were on hand to meet the celebrated poetess that they were late and would see the press later at the hotel. She did not speak until they were safely installed in a wide-windowed suite high on a hill that overlooked the incredible nature-and-man-made magnificence of San Francisco Bay.

Then, leaning back in an armchair and lighting a cigarette she interrupted Elspeth's rhapsodic delight in the view from the window with a curt back-to-business statement.

"I neither like nor understand what happened on that train," she said coldly. "One of the great advantages of the interworld service—and one of its basic reasons for absolute secrecy—is that we can move into whatever world needs us without warning elements who might be able to oppose us if they were prepared."

"In other words, you're afraid your Asiatic friends may be ready to play rough," said Mack quietly. "Funny—I thought of that when you briefed us on the situation here yesterday."

"But how could they know?" protested Juana. "There can't have been a leak. If there were, no supposedly sane person would believe it. No one except the initiate ever has."

"There has to be a first time, honey," said Mack softly.

"*Oh!*" Elspeth sat up straight from the window seat, a hand flying to her mouth. She had just remembered the zabaglione. She told them about it.

"It's possible—though it would be the first interworld stowaway in our history as far as I know," said Juana, frowning. "If it is, it makes things even worse."

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"You mean it will open up the tangency points?" Mack asked.

"Hardly." Juana dismissed this with a gesture. "They are not that simple. But any so-and-so smart enough to jump worlds without training is smart enough to have overheard my briefing in the train. Which means he'll be smart enough to follow through to our enemies here and tell them our story."

"I wonder who it is—and why," mused Elspeth.

"We'll probably find out soon enough," Juana said drily. She rose, shook down her skirt, looking absurdly little girl. "All right, kids, let's get ready for our act with the press."

UNDER the conditions it was an ordeal but when at last it was over Juana informed Elspeth that she had played her role of visiting celebrity well. The poet pushed back her blond hair and felt a grin come from deep within her.

"I never knew I was such a ham," she said. "I love it."

"You use the word ham that way in your world, too?" said Juana unexpectedly. "Funny—I never thought of it before but some of us may carry the slang of one world to another."

"Speaking of ham—I'm hungry," said Mack, looking sullen but relieved after getting away with playing the poetical secretary—a part which had taxed his histrionic ability to the bone.

They ate in an amazing restaurant at the top of the hotel, with a panoramic view of the city and bay that surpassed that from the big window of their drawing room a half dozen floors below. Elspeth felt wide-eyed and young at the attention they drew.

The view was incredible. San Francisco was a great city in her world and Mack's but it was nothing like this. The tracery of lights along the bridges, the great towers of the skyscrapers, the blaze of suburban cities across the bay—it was breathtaking.

Elspeth wondered how it could be put into poetry. Surely the sight had inspired thousands of versifiers in this strange new world—some of whom inevitably must have caught some of its grandeur in words and meter. She would have to approach it from the other way, from the way of infinite, relative smallness.

Perhaps some early legendary giant—a giant who played among the lofty redwoods like a child among saplings—might return from his wanderings to find this city sprawled upon one of his former playgrounds, might feel dwarfed for the first time in his life. He might—but she decided it was pretty corny.

Unexpectedly someone in a full-dress party two tables away recognized Juana, and they were suddenly in the swirling center of a swarm of merry-makers. Elspeth found it hard to keep up with the rapid-fire of their talk, with their slang, with their allusions. But Juana seemed to glow and took care of things beautifully.

After all, as the visiting poetess from abroad, Elspeth was in character as a remote and untalkative creature, while Mack, as a mere secretary, was not supposed to speak. Although one or two of the girls glanced at him speculatively from time to time during the ninety-odd minutes they spent as members of the party. Elspeth felt a pang of jealous resentment and despised herself for feeling it.

Later, back in the drawing room, Juana kicked off her slippers and massaged her tiny feet thoughtfully. "I speeded things up up there, I think. That brunette is a senator's daughter and a great pal of Christine Roosevelt. I have a hunch you'll be hearing from Christine herself by tomorrow noon."

She scowled, letting go of her foot and reaching for a cigarette. "I wish I knew for certain who it was that pulled the hasel on the train—even more what his contacts are—*and* his motives. Unless he's clever as hell it's going to take him a little time to make contact with the Asians. Especially if he is using that Columbian funny-money. He

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might land in jail for passing queer—but that's too much to hope for."

Elspeth once again found herself thinking of Everard—as she had in the stateroom the day before. He was clever, he was tough, he had reason to hate Mack and herself. They had not only wrecked his assignment, they had also wrecked the war on which he had proposed to thrive emotionally and materially.

"I wonder," she said. The others looked at her expectantly and all at once she felt intuitive and foolish. "It's nothing," she said. "Merely a zany fancy. I'm going to turn in."

THEY rose in midmorning and breakfasted together in the drawing room. The city beyond the windows was shrouded thickly in heavy fog. It was, on the whole, an oppressive and miserable morning. Mack brooded over his briefcase like a human bulldog, and Juana and Elspeth scanned the papers. It did the poet no inner good to read herself described as a "colorlessly incisive and typically British blonde, whose conversation seemed to consist of unrhymed and occasionally profane monosyllables . . ."

"On the nose," said Mack with a chuckle as Juana read it aloud. Elspeth told him to close his large rhinoceros mouth to no avail and fell sulky. Mack got out his big pistol and began to check its workings. He had the chamber in his lap when the telephone rang, making them all start.

"Miss Marriner's apartment," said Juana smoothly. She listened briefly, then winked and nodded over the instrument at the others. Mack put his weapon together with a sharp series of clicking sounds.

"Yes, I'm sure Miss Marriner would be highly honored," said the dark redhead. "Of course you know she never travels alone. Mr. Fraser and I are always with her. . . . Fine, I trust that won't be too inconvenient. . . . Certainly, we shall be ready at four."

Hanging up, Juana clapped her hands together and did a little jig. "This is it, kids," she told them, grinning. "The President and his ever-lovin' daughter are staying at one of those monstrous places out on the peninsula. We, it seems, are very much wanted. They're sending a car for us at four o'clock. *Yippee!* I feel at least ten years younger."

"Careful," said Elspeth. "That would put you under the age of consent."

Juana made a face at her and off-to-Buffaloed into her own bedroom. "If I'm to visit the President I'm going to see my seams are straight," she called over her shoulder.

Mack headed for his room, hesitated, the went on in, lugging the heavy briefcase. Elspeth remained where she was, setting her thoughts in order. She was going to have to play her part without a single slip from here on in. All at once she was a little frightened—not of Everard or Asian spies—this was plain stage terror.

Four o'clock took a long time coming but the phone rang almost on the dot with the announcement that a car had arrived to pick up Miss Marriner and staff. Mack enlisted the aid of the elevator man to help lug their three suitcases and the briefcase to the lift.

Just as the elevator doors opened on the lobby one of the passengers, a middle-aged woman of pasty complexion, gave a groan and began to topple in a faint. Involuntarily Mack moved to help her from the elevator. At which the other passenger, a heavy-set man with a black beard showing through his skin, moved forward and without a word yanked the briefcase from Mack's startled grasp.

There was a confused tussle, in the course of which the "fainting" woman hit the liftman over the head with what seemed to be a loaded unbrella, Mack slugged the heavy-set marauder and the briefcase was shrewdly bashed open.

Seconds later both heavy-set man and middle-aged woman were lost amid the

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crowds in the lobby, while a curious swarm was blanketing the view of their flight. Standing on tiptoe, Elspeth tried to see where they went, caught a glimpse of them darting through a fog-backed outer door—and of an elegant familiar figure covering their retreat.

"Everard!" she exclaimed as Mack cursed.

"The dirty so-and-so's got my fuel sample," he exploded. "What do we do now?"

XIII

BACK upstairs—quickly," snapped Juana. "The presidential car is going to have to wait." She brushed off disturbed hotel employees with polite but brusque efficiency, somehow got them, disturbed and disheveled, back to the suite.

"The damned goons really did it," muttered Mack, his tie half out of sight under his collar as he shook his head over the ruin of his precious briefcase.

"I saw Everard," said Elspeth, sitting breathless and erect on the arm of the sofa. "He was covering our friends' retreat. I caught a glimpse of him shepherding them out the street door."

"Blast!" said Mack, his lips thinning. "I had an idea that so-and-so meant trouble from the beginning. But if I'd known how much—" He shook his head again. "These damned plans are worse than useless without the fuel. And without the sample it may take them years to get it. Everard's cooked our goose."

"For heaven's sake, stop using tired clichés!" snapped Elspeth, whose nerves were on their beam ends.

"Shhhhh!" said Juana, scowling. She had gone directly to the telephone on entering the room, had dialed a number after getting an outside line—one of the specialties of the suite. She said, "Juana Brooks—forty-seven—this world—red emergency." She then gave a terse but well organized account of what had happened—including a complete description of their two elevator attackers. She listened briefly, then looked across at Elspeth.

"Everard," she said. "Can you describe him?"

"Sure." Mack broke in before the poet could gather her thoughts. "Five-eleven—about one-sixty—light brown hair—light blue eyes—fair skin—hair-line mustache on upper lip."

"Also a bit of a swish," said Elspeth, surprised at Mack's accurate memory but determined not to show it. "Accent very British indeed—or at least it was while he was with us."

"That should do it," said Juana, who had been repeating their words verbatim into the phone. "Have you orders?" She listened, murmured, "I understand," hung up and faced them, her hand still on the phone.

"This is a rabbit punch and no fooling," she told them quickly. "Here's the pitch—you two carry on. Go along in the presidential car as we planned. Elly, go after the President—but slowly and carefully. Arrangements are already being made to put us in an outlying cottage on the estate.

"When you've talked enough poetry with Christine, tell her you're fascinated by General Curtis. Try to arrange to meet him sometime tomorrow where Mack and I can talk to him. Get him to come to the cottage for a drink with Christine. He's a hot rocket man. Also close to President Roosevelt. Tell Christine you're mad to do a big poem about rockets and the magic of space-flight. Got it?"

"I think so," said Elly, running her tongue over her lower lip. She felt like someone walking through a nightmare.

"You'd better," said Juana and all of her languorous charm had faded before crisp efficiency. Then, turning to Mack, "Mack, you give me those plans but take the briefcase with you. Here, fill it with these." She picked up some newspapers, handed them to him, took the precious blueprints from him and put them away in her handbag.

"Both of you talk about the robbery

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in the elevator as if it were inexplicable. After all, why should anyone want to rob a poet? It will draw attention to you, get you both noticed. Now beat it, both of you, while I try to square this."

"But how about you?" asked Elspeth, frowning.

"And the blueprints?" said Mack anxiously.

"Don't worry—I'll be okay," said the dark redhead with a quiet assurance that brooked no denial. "I'll be along later—after dinner probably. You might see to it that I reach the cottage without difficulty. We're in a jam and we've all got to play our parts or we shan't get out of it."

They went down together once more, Mack nursing the damaged briefcase as if it were a just-born baby. There was still considerable confusion in the lobby but they got through to the waiting limousine without difficulty. Juana left them on the sidewalk with a faint grin and a finger salute.

"Golly, what a person!" said Elspeth behind the broad back of a smart chauffeur as they drove smoothly off into traffic.

"Ummm," said Mack thoughtfully. Elspeth glanced at her partner, saw that he was looking out the window blankly, a slight frown on his face. "She's a lot of woman, too."

"All *right*," said Elspeth testily. "I wasn't thinking of that, you lecher."

Mack gave her a twisted half-smile. "Oddly enough," he said, "neither was I."

THE fog lifted when they got beyond the rim of the city and they drove the magnificent miles to the peninsula in a warm bath of golden afternoon sunlight. They went through trim small towns and hamlets, past areas of clipped lawn and carefully tended greenery, caught occasional glimpses of great estates.

"I think I like this world, Mack," said Elspeth suddenly.

"It's fast—but it's happy," said Mack with unexpected insight. "It would be a rotten shame if it were spoiled."

"That filthy Everard," said Elspeth. For the first time in her life she was beginning to learn the real meaning of hate. She had known dislikes—yes, violent dislikes—but what she was feeling at the moment was something utterly new to her, something she could sense that she was never going to forget.

"*Hey!*" said Mack, looking at her. "Don't bite a hunk out of *me! I* didn't steal the blueprints."

"Sorry," she said with a mirthless laugh, forcing her muscles to relax. "I feel a little werewolfish when I think about poor dear Everard. Why didn't we kill him when we had him in the Pipit?"

"We couldn't—then," said Mack softly. Elspeth was still pondering this cryptic statement when the limousine stopped at a wrought-iron gate in a high brick wall. The gate was opened by an alert-looking pair of young men, one of whom questioned the driver briefly and permitted them to drive through into the landscaped grounds.

A quarter of a mile further on, past more lawns, oddly trimmed trees and well-groomed hedges, they stopped again beneath a large porte cochere in front of an immense pillared house of white in neoclassic style. Another pair of Secret Service men looked them over and then a youngish butler in ribbed waistcoat, blue tailcoat, breeches and brass buttons entered the front of the limousine.

They were driven around the house and perhaps a hundred yards beyond it to a small white cottage that nestled in a stand of cedars. Beyond it shimmered a gray-blue lake. Here the butler took their luggage—save for Mack's dummy briefcase—and showed them into the cottage. He was somewhat apologetic.

"Mr. Gardienne hopes you will not object to being so far from the house," he told them, "but with the President's party here—" He paused to gesture his

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apology, added, "Whenever you're ready, ma'am, Miss Roosevelt is waiting for you. You can reach the house by crossing the side lawn." He pointed the way and departed.

"Slumming" said Mack, looking around the low, luxuriously appointed living room with its well equipped fireplace and bar. It was small only by comparison with the monster house across the lawn.

"If this be slumming, I'm for it," said Elspeth. Not only did three large bedrooms, each with its own bath, open from the central chamber but in a rear wing were dining room and kitchen as well.

"I don't know why it is but every time I get in a place like this I have a job to do," said Mack. He sat down in an armchair, put his feet up on a hassock. "This time the job is yours, boss-woman. Hop to it."

"Don't remind me," pleaded Elspeth, who was too nervous at the prospect of what lay ahead to feel up to swapping insults with the photographer. She went into her bathroom, checked dress, hairdo and makeup, then emerged with a sigh. Mack gave her a quick straight drink, which he had prepared, and as she moved slowly across the lawn she almost forgot how much she disliked him.

CHRISTINE ROOSEVELT proved rather a surprise. Instead of the assured, mentally-corseted young woman her poems had led Elspeth to expect, she found the President's daughter to be a tall sensitive girl, much younger than her pictures in appearance, whose shyness made her almost noncommittal during the opening gambits.

"It was swell of you to come here to see me, Miss Marriner", she said when she had maneuvered the poetess into what seemed to be her own private drawing room upstairs. Around them the house was aquiver with a sense of movement and importance, of comings and goings and low-pitched conversations, of the presence of many more people than it was accustomed to hold.

"I've read your poems," Elspeth said bluntly. From her own past shyness she knew that the quick kindly incision was the best method of parting the barrier between them.

"They stink, don't they?" said Christine almost diffidently, looking away toward a lofty window with ivory damask drapes.

"They don't stink," said Elspeth quietly and as sincerely as she could. "But they aren't poetry yet."

"Do you think they ever will be?" said Christine eagerly, her diffidence vanishing in the face of even negative interest.

"That," said Elspeth, "is entirely up to you. I don't want to sound bromidic, but you've got to cut loose from the world you were planted in and find one of your own."

"But how can I?" the girl asked almost tragically, brushing a wisp of silver-reddish hair back from her forehead. "I mean, a President's daughter and all—" She made a hopeless gesture.

"You can find your own world within yourself—in fact, you must if you ever hope to find it anywhere," Elspeth told her and they were off. To the surprise of both of them they were only two years apart in age. They were still at it, hot and heavy, when a tall, somewhat portly man, whose red hair matched his daughter's and whose face showed lines of immense fatigue, entered the room without knocking.

"Dad," said Christine, rising and giving him a hug. "When did they let you out? I thought those Jugoslavs—"

"Old Chichi came down with a twinge of gout and they called off the reception," he said with a sudden infectious smile that reminded Elspeth of the famous Roosevelt smile of her own world. "So I hightailed it right out here. I got out of the party but I still want a drink—just you and me, how about it, Chris?"

"But, Dad," said his daughter, "I have

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Elly—Miss Marriner here with me. Don't be rude."

ELSPETH said, "I'm on my way." She smiled and moved toward the door. The President of the United States clapped a hand over his forehead and stepped into her path.

"You'll have to stick it out now if only to cover my embarrassment," said the President, extending a large and friendly hand in greeting. "You're telling Christine how to write poetry?"

"She's tremendous, Dad," said the President's daughter. "I'll ring for a drink for all of us." She suited the action to the word. Meanwhile the chief executive studied Elspeth.

"You look a lot better than your newspictures," he told her with an intonation that robbed the remark of all unflattering entendre. Then a look of quick concern crossed his countenance. "But didn't I hear something about you're being attacked and robbed in town on your way here?"

"It was nothing," said Elspeth in what she hoped was a tone and manner bound to draw further questions. It worked, and for the next half hour she was busy explaining the incident, shaking her head as the Roosevelts sought some explanation.

At the end of that time a grave secretary in striped pants entered and spoke low in the President's ear. He sighed, put down his glass and said, "They've caught up with me, kids. I've got to go." He rose, bowed over Elspeth's hand, added, "Is there anything I can do to make your visit more pleasant?"

Elspeth gathered herself, said, "As a matter of fact I'd like to meet General Curtis if I might."

"Not *you*, Elly!" said Christine in mock despair.

"He's a wolf," said the President with a smile.

"He's also your rocket expert, I hear," said the poet, taking the bit in her teeth. "I'm dreadfully excited about rockets and the possibility of spaceflight. In fact one of my reasons for coming west was a hope of seeing White Sands. I'm hoping to do my next big poem about it."

"Curt isn't much on poetry," said the President, "but he's really jet-propelled where rockets are concerned."

"*And* creatures in skirts," put in Christine drily. "But if you must meet him, Elly, I'll arrange it."

Her brashness paid off. Not only did she meet the dark and gallant General Curtis when she returned to the big house for dinner but, surprisingly, she was seated next to him at table. To her further surprise he proved quite serious when she suggested that there might be a big poem in a man's efforts to escape from his planet. His hazel eyes grew thoughtful as he considered it.

"I only hope both of us get a chance to know space at first hand before we die," he told her. He sighed, shook his head. "But we have a lot of bridges yet to cross, Miss Marriner."

"You sound awfully discouraged, General," said Elspeth with what she hoped was something approaching dimpled charm. "Perhaps, if you're not too busy tomorrow, you'll come to the cottage for a cocktail before lunch—you and Christine. I might have something that would help you to cross bridges."

"That, Miss Marriner, you definitely have," said the general, smiling back. He was unexpectedly youthful in appearing, only the faint weathered lines of his neck and his prematurely gray temples hinting at his age. He was almost too handsome but there was steel in him. To her surprise, Elspeth liked him. She wondered if she were retrogressing to the point where she would fall for anything in uniform. First Marshal Henry, now General Curtis.

The date was arranged with Christine's full approval after dinner. A movie was to be shown in the projection room which her host, Gardienne, had built in his basement, but before the

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party moved downstairs a servant approached Elspeth with a message on a tray. It was from Juana, asked her to come to the cottage at once.

Elspeth made her apologies, reconfirmed tomorrow's date and slipped out and across the lawn. The moon was out already and the entire magnificent estate seemed tipped with silver and splashed with shadows of lampblack. It had been a pleasant evening, glamorous if not thrilling. Elspeth decided she was getting blasé. Interworld travel seemed to involve some pretty high life.

SHE forgot about high life once she was back with Mack and Juana. The brunette was smoking a cigarette tensely, and Mack was again checking the working of his pistol. Before explaining what she had done, Juana asked Elspeth to tell her what had happened at the big house.

"So far—excellent," she said when the poet had finished. "I only hope my end went as well." She scowled, threw her smoke into the fireplace and crossed to a table at one side of it on which stood a small leather-covered dialed device that might have been a portable radio—but was obviously more complex.

"We know only one thing," she said, working the dials and studying the wavering of a needle indicator. "Your friend van Hooten—and he seems to be a prime heel of heels—has not turned in that fuel sample to his principals—yet."

"How can you be sure?" Mack asked suspiciously.

Juana indicated the leather box with the dials. "This is a very special device," she said. "We call it the transferometer."

"What is it, Juana?" Elspeth inquired.

"Just that. It's a detector of sorts. I'm not going to give you an involved explanation—I couldn't if I wanted to, kids, and there isn't time. But each different world in each tangential universe has its own atomic scale. You might say that each exists in the holes in the other's quantum rhythms.

"When you undergo a transfer you are actually undergoing an atomic change. Otherwise no transfer would be possible—you'd be keyed to one world only. Now this transferometer can be keyed to sensitivity to any of the atomic scales of any of the known worlds. They are all listed, numbered and scaled, of course."

"I think I get it," said Mack, once again slapping his gun back into place. "By tuning that thing to the world we just left you can get some idea of any object from that world in this one—like van Hooten, for instance."

"It's not quite that simple," said Juana. "Remember, both your friend van Hooten and the fuel sample took the transfer process with us. However, they are both native to the Columbian world. And this indicator registers the fact."

"How does that help us find them?" Mack asked dubiously. "If Elly has this General Muck-a-muck due here tomorrow for cocktails, we've got to have that fuel sample ready."

"Come here, Mack," said Juana, crooking a finger. "You too, Elly." They moved up beside her and she showed them a perpendicular white line across the dial. She said, "This line represents this very spot—on an axis vertical to the Earth.

"The large dial is keyed to organic substance—so it represents dear Everard. The smaller dial—" she indicated it on the left face of the indicator—"is keyed to inorganic substance. That represents your rocket-fuel sample."

"How wide a radius does it cover?" asked Mack, his interest rising. Juana smiled crookedly.

"Further than you think," she told him. "It cuts the cord of Earth and is not limited, like television without a cable, by the horizon. The radius is close to a thousand miles in the direction tuned."

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"How do you know when you're tuned?" Elly asked.

"By this," said the little redhead. She pressed a button under one dial, got a low and rapid *beep*, got a similar, more highly-pitched *beep* by turning a switch under the other. "When you get that sound cleanly you're on a direct line—a zero."

"Mighty cute," said Mack, rubbing his chin. "But then what do the needles show?"

"The needle shows closeness and direction. In conjunction with your beam tuner it gives you an exact idea of both."

"Then our friend must be getting mighty warm," said Mack.

"He is," the dark girl told him. "We got our first fixes in the city and I came out here as soon as we found he was headed this way. It's my hunch he has to have both the plans and the fuel sample or else."

"What I don't understand," said Mack, "is why he is lugging the fuel sample around with him."

"Because he doesn't dare part with it and it's neither bulky nor heavy," Juana replied. "He's probably told them—whoever they are—that the elevator attack was a complete bust. He wants to pull the whole deal off on his own."

"But how can he get at us?" Elspeth asked. "The guards—"

"The lake," said the dark redhead, nodding toward the door of the cottage. "He's coming in that way. Don't worry—he or rather his colleagues have this estate thoroughly cased."

"Where *are* the blueprints?" Elspeth asked anxiously.

"The indicator needles—" began Mack, pointing at it.

He never got a chance to finish. He was interrupted by a drawling pseudo-British voice from the doorway that responded to Elspeth's question with, "Yes, darlings, where *are* the blueprints? Precisely the question I was going to ask myself."

Everard, clad in dripping shorts only, but wearing a heavy money belt, was standing there. In his hand was an odd-looking weapon that made Elspeth gasp.

"A *disintegrator!*" she cried. "He's got a disintegrator!"

XIV

"YOU'RE so absolutely right, darling," said Everard. "Nothing will please me more than to give you a demonstration. I assure you I shall be devasted if you *do* tell me where the plans are. Because then I'd have little reason to use it, would I?"

He flipped the vicious weapon casually in his hand, letting its disced and slotted muzzle point first at Elspeth, then at Juana. The dark redhead looked sharply at the transferometer dials, then snapped off the instrument and turned to study Everard.

"You took a risk—leaving your clothes across the lake," she said calmly. "If any of the guards find them—" She shrugged and added. "But I'm glad you brought the fuel sample in your belt. It will save us the trouble of hunting for it."

"My good woman," said Everard haughtily, "the blueprints. I feel certain that our mutual friends"—with a bow toward Mack and Elspeth—"have told you something of the uses of this weapon."

"It was scarcely news to me," said Juana. Defying the tightening of his finger on the trigger, she reached for and lit a cigarette. "I'm sorry about the rocket plans, Everard, really I am. Unfortunately they are where no one—not even clever you—can get them. I put them in the mail—registered—earlier this evening."

"Then there is nothing to do but wait," said Everard, moving to a chair and sitting down without relaxing his guard.

"It won't work," said Elspeth, coming out of the chill fear which had wrapped her like a coccoon since sight-

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ing Everard and the disintegrator. "You can't stay awake that long. And you can't kill us and hope to get the prints. How did you get here?"

"I swam, of course," said Everard. Then, "Oh, the guards—how *stupid* of me! This little dis-gun of mine took care of them."

"When their disappearance is noted there will be a search," said Mack solemnly. His eyes had not left Everard since his dramatic entry. "You can't get away with it and you know it."

"Why not give up?" said Juana gently. "Turn over the fuel sample. I have permission to arrange for your transfer to a world more suited to your—um—talents than this one or yours."

Everard's face stiffened and his eyes lit up with what Elspeth realized, to her surprise, was fear. He said, "Oh, no. How do I know what sort of a world you'd put me in? If I had had any idea when I stowed away on the train that you were going to—to change worlds I—" His voice faded out.

"You wouldn't have come?" said Mack, leaning forward.

"No, I'd have used this—" again indicating his weapon—"before you were able to do whatever it was you did on that train."

Elspeth, shocked, gave a little cry that came from deep within her. That such a man, so obviously educated and civilized and well-bred, could be so utterly brutal in furthering his own selfish ends was something she found it hard to believe. It caused her to spill her bag, which was on the right arm of her chair. She stooped to pick it up.

Through reflection Everard's pale blue eyes followed her motion. Juana chose that moment to shoot through her own handbag with her little automatic. The sharp *splat* of the shot, deafening in the low-ceiled room, drowned the more sickening thud of lead striking human flesh as the bullet tore its way through Everard's unclad torso.

Her full lips tightly compressed, Juana fired again and again. Her aim was accurate. Jarred as he was by the shock and impact of the bullets, Everard swung his arm toward her, lifting the disintegrator. Mack leapt from his chair with a yell of fury and flung himself at the vicious intruder.

He struck Everard with the violence and ferocity of a charging panther, knocking his chair clean over on its back and jamming the Columbian against the wall beyond it. The ugly looking disintegrator described an arc in the air and hit the carpet with a dull *thock*. Elspeth scrambled after it and picked it up.

Straightening, she looked around her at a scene of horror. Everard was sitting on the floor against the far wall beyond the overturned chair, his eyes glazed and dull, blood trickling from the two holes in his chest and from the corner of his mouth.

MACK, growling like an enraged animal, was wrenching the heavy belt from around his waist. He was apparently unaware of something that Elspeth noticed first with growing horror. Juana—Juana wasn't. A part of her chair remained and it had a seared look—as if it had been momentarily subjected to incredible heat. Elspeth had a sudden sickening memory of the similar stain in the pavement outside of Bienville House in Baton Rouge.

Mack rose, holding the heavy belt. He saw what had happened, looked at the dis-gun in Elspeth's trembling fist, than back at where Juana had been sitting seconds before. Elspeth nodded, unable to speak.

The photographer turned back to the dying Everard. He took a backward step, then moved forward like a football goal kicker and booted him with all his force, right in the middle of his classic features.

"I only wish he would feel it," he said savagely.

Elspeth found herself agreeing with

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him and was frightened at her own brutality. She sank into the chair behind her and covered her face to shut out the ghastly vision. Then there were running footsteps outside and she looked up to see a quartet of uniformed officers in the doorway.

Mack did the talking. "This so-and-so," he said, nodding toward Everard's body, for the Columbian was now very dead, "was behind that attack on us in the hotel this afternoon. Elly—Miss Marriner spotted him then."

He went on to explain that the man must have swum the lake after eliminating a couple of guards, had entered the cottage with an incredible new weapon, had been fatally shot by Miss Brooks and in turn had rayed her.

"There's her gun on the floor by the chair she was sitting in," he concluded, nodded toward it, the severed handbag where it lay on the carpet with half-burned handle of Juana's gun protruding from it. "As for our friend's weapon —Miss Marriner is holding it."

After that things happened fast. The transferometer had been destroyed by Everard's blast at Juana, so they did not have to attempt to explain that fantastic instrument or its uses. But when it was found that the guards on the other side of the lake had vanished without trace or explanation, when the disintegrator was examined, and Everard's clothes were found close to the water—they began to be believed.

"It's odd that you should have been selected as the target of this fantastic attack, Miss Marriner." A Major Leach of Army Intelligence was speaking. "I don't mean to decry your poetry or its value but it simly doesn't make sense."

"Of course not, Major," said Elspeth. She had regained a measure of self-control by recalling that Juana had died in order to enable them to complete their assignment, that it was up to her and Mack to make sure that the gallant dark redhead had not died in vain. "This attack tonight has merely precipitated things."

"What sort of things?" It was a lynx-eyed plainclothesman who asked this question.

Elspeth told him that she was on a secret mission of considerable importance, that she had arranged to explain a portion of it to General Curtis on the morrow, in company with the President's daughter. She suggested that she and Mack should see both General Curtis and the Chief Executive as soon as possible.

"They sure do things different on the other side," she heard one of her questioners mutter. "Imagine—a *poet*—and a she-poet at that! Well, judging from that dis—dis—whatever it is, she's sure got something. Wonder how many of them the Commies have."

"I can answer that," said Elspeth calmly. "None. This one was stolen. However, I'm glad to be able to turn it over to you."

There was what seemed to be an interminable wait but by a small gilt banjo clock on the wall it was still short of midnight when Elspeth and Mack were ushered into a room assigned to the President.

HE WAS standing before the cold fireplace, his hands behind his back, his gaze questioning, thoughtful, polite. With him were only two others—Christine and General Curtis. The general was holding the dis-gun as if he didn't quite believe it.

"I think you wanted to see us," President Roosevelt said softly. He smiled. "From what I have heard you must have a message of vital importance—at least our enemies seem to think so."

"Mr. President," said Elspeth quietly, "what would you say if we were to bring you the means of mastering space-flight —not ten years from now, not five, but just as soon as you can build according to complete specifications."

"I'd say I'm afraid I can't believe you," said the President. He lifted an eyebrow at General Curtis. "Right, Curt?"

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"Five minutes ago I'd have agreed," said the General, still studying the bizarre weapon. "After looking at this I'm willing to listen. But I'd like to know why *we're* getting the break—if we *are* getting it. I'd like to hear more about it."

"My secretary," said Elspeth, nodding toward Mack, "has with him, thanks to the permission of your staff, a sample of the type of fuel that will make space-flight not only possible but compartively cheap."

"Miss Brooks—" for a moment her voice wavered as she thought of that gay dark laughing loveliness so utterly wiped out—"Miss Brooks, in view of the earlier attack in the hotel, has already sent the ship plans here by registered mail. She did not have time to tell us whom they were addressed to—but presumably they will arrive with one of our names on the package."

"Let's have a look at this miracle-fuel, Fraser," said General Curtis, stepping forward, still holding the dis-gun. Mack handed him the packet without a word and the general, after receiving nodded permission from the President, retired to a far corner of the room to unwrap it and study the written material with it.

"I don't pretend to understand, Elly," said Christine, coming forward and taking both her hands, "but I know you're a very great person. I know you have done nothing wrong."

"I've done plenty wrong in my day I'm afraid," said the poet ruefully. "But you didn't have a chance to meet the great one among us. It was Juana Brooks that really put this over."

"Would either of you like a drink?" said the President, moving toward a portable bar. "I know *I* would."

Mack moved to take care of their service, and Elspeth and Christine sat down together, talking trivialities in spurts. It was a time of waiting for all of them.

Suddenly General Curtis gave what sounded like a war whoop, jumped out of his chair and made a motion as if to hurl the papers he was reading to the ground. "Of all the damned idiotic dolts—fools!" he shouted and he might have been doing an Indian dance.

"Something wrong, General?" the President asked sharply.

"Only all of *us!*" said Curtis, forgetting Presidential courtesies in his fervor. "You know what this is? It's a way of making atomic fuel out of plain sodium. Furthermore it's a way of polarizing and shielding a sodium drive indefinitely. Furthermore, without testing this sample, I think it will work."

"Good Lord!" said the President, sinking slowly into a chair. He stared curiously at Elspeth, then at Mack. "I don't suppose," he said almost wistfully, "that you could tell us more about this? You and it didn't come out of thin air, did you?"

"Hardly, Mr. President," said Elspeth in response to both questions. He studied her for a long moment, then sighed and lifted his drink in a silent toast to both of them.

"And when I think of how our big brains have botched this all the way!" growled General Curtis from his corner.

"If this does work out, as the general seems to believe it will," President Roosevelt put in, "we shall all be eternally in your debt. I hope there is something we can do in return."

"There is something we are seeking and have been informed you have," said Elspeth, feeling far from steady. "It's a shield against the terrible heat of the disintegrator. It may be a vitally important factor on—" She caught Mack's warning look just in time and said, "where we come from."

"How about it, General?" the President asked. Curtis, who was once more examining the disintegrator, looked up thoughtfully.

After a moment he said, "Apparently this is a heat projector developed to an amazing degree—even beyond our new flame throwers. It's just possible our

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new asbestos-glass fabric might do the trick. We'll test in the morning.

"If it works out successfully, you people are welcome to it," the President told Elspeth and Mack. "It seems a very small return."

"It means a very great deal to us, Mr. President," Elspeth said to the chief executive. Apparently there was a chance that Juana's death might in some measure be avenged.

The following morning—none of them went to bed that night—the blueprints arrived, and again General Curtis spent his time being torn between admiration for the Reed Weston ship and self-reproach over the backwardness of American scientists.

It was that afternoon that President Roosevelt, making one of the great gambles of history, told the vast Congress of Nations assembled in the Presidio that the United States at last had the secret of space-flight within its grasp, that the road to the planets would soon be open to human pioneering and expansion.

"It will not be an easy road," he told them in conclusion. "The way of the pioneer has never been easy. It may even prove an impossible road, though this I do not believe. Man will conquer whatever he must, no matter how alien, how vast or puny, how fearsome or difficult it may appear.

"Furthermore," he went on, his voice rising to the climax of his speech, "as soon as we have successfully finished certain experiments now under way, we shall turn the entire data over to the United Nations to be shared by all who desire the planets under the United Nations banner."

Elspeth, sitting in a special seat in the balcony, barely felt the tap on her shoulder. She jumped, turned, looked up at Mack and General Curtis. Mack said, "Come out of it, Elly. We're on our way to White Sands. You wouldn't want to miss the finale?"

They were driven to a vast airport on an artificial island in the bay under one of the amazing spidery bridges, and were bundled into a vast and deadly looking Air Force jet transport which resembled nothing yet seen on either their world or that of Columbia.

IT TOOK off with a smooth roar that quickly became a faint scream, more felt than heard as it reached supersonic heights. Southeast they sped, over the towering coast range and the even loftier Rockies, scaling the rugged snow-capped mountain barriers with almost insolent ease. Elspeth got the feeling almost of being in space. She said as much to Mack, sitting beside her.

"They need seven miles a second to get clear of Earth," he told her pedantically. "That's four hundred and twenty miles a minute. I doubt if we're doing much over twelve miles a minute—if that. Still," he conceded, "that's moving right along."

"Mack," she said and to her surprise she found that her hand had somehow crept into his big mitt. "Mack, I'm scared without Juana. I feel like—oh, I don't know, I feel lost. How are we supposed to get out of this world without her?"

"I know what you mean, Elly," he told her with what she supposed was meant to be comfort. "I feel the same way. Of course, if we're stuck, we're stuck, and it's a good thing we've both got jobs and connections ready-made. Still, it isn't *our* world." He paused, shook his head, patted her hand.

"Somehow I don't think they'll leave us here," he went on. "They seemed much too well organized."

"But how will we know whoever comes for us if they *do* send someone?" Elspeth asked. She knew she was being a fine old panic bag but she couldn't help it. She had to voice her fears. "How do we know we won't pick another Everard?"

"We don't," said Mack and all at once his eyes were shadowed and the lines around his mouth had deepened. "But if we do—and *if* we do, we'll find out—

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we'll know what to do this time."

"Juana always seemed to be in touch," said Elspeth. "We're like Hansel and Gretel or babes in the wood."

"She knew the ropes," said Mack. "If we're going on with them we'll have to learn 'em, that's all, Elly. You'd better try to get some sleep." He slid down to accommodate her head.

Somehow she did manage to sleep, while the big plane cut across Nevada, across Arizona and part of New Mexico. She was awakened by a sudden move on the part of Mack, opened her eyes to find him leaning across her to peer out the window. The plane was banking in a sharp turn as it descended.

Below was an amazing spectacle. It was desert—desert as far as the eye could reach—desert like parts of the classic Sahara with little hills and dunes and ridges looking like ripples in some vast sand sea.

But men were there, too, and their mark was upon the desert. She saw square mile after square mile of buildings, low, long, efficient in appearance. Barracks, houses, shops, churches, hospitals, acre upon acre of glass-roofed workshops. The streets were laid out in neat geometric pattern and upon them crept small black things that must be automobiles.

Close by the city they approached was the airport, its hangars and long concrete strips in abstract pattern marking the ever-present sand. A few miles beyond lay the still vaster launching grounds, extending far into the dusk.

"It's a little like Norman in Columbia," she said to Mack.

"Not much," said Mack. "They have the plant here but they haven't got the ship. *We're* bringing them that." There was a certain fierce pride in his speech and it found an echo in her heart. Come what may, they were delivering the goods as promised.

"Enjoy the trip?" General Curtis was bending over them. He had spent most of the journey in the pilot's compartment, and Elspeth suspected he had been flying the big ship himself.

"Wonderful!" she told him, and Mack nodded.

"Better belt in—we're landing," he said. Then, "Word just came that some big scientist from New York will be here to meet us—or rather *you*, Mack. He wants to talk to you about this fuel."

"I'm no nuclear physicist," said Mack. "But I have seen how it's handled. I'll do what I can."

Elspeth had one of her psychic touches as she fastened the broad webbed belt about her waist. The scientist from New York meant something—what she didn't know, or why—but she did know he was going to be important to them. She steeled herself against any sort of surprise.

But she was totally unprepared for the surprise she got on landing. The chunky, dynamic bespectacled "scientist from New York," who came forward to greet them with a pleasant smile on his face, was none other than Orrin Lewis, Mack's editor-in-chief of *Picture Week*, the man who had teamed them up and sent them on the assignment to Hatteras Keys.

XV

"SO WHEN word about Juana came in I thought I'd better come through after you," said "Doctor" Lewis, regarding them over a highball. It was late at night and they were lounging around in a room of the small frame house that had been assigned to them.

"Incidentally this is one of the damnedest worlds I ever visited," the editor went on, his broad low brow furrowed with thought. "I don't do much transferring any more and it's my first visit here." He paused, looked at his glass, shook his head. "What a slew of paradoxes!" he added.

"They have more peace organizations than any other world in this stage of development—and they fight more wars. They have more medicine—and more sickness. They have more church mem-

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bers—and more sinners."

"Don't the two usually walk hand in hand?" Elspeth asked.

"Touché!" said Orrin Lewis with a faint smile. "It's energy I suppose. Well, we're giving them an outlet in the planets."

"And when the planets have been exhausted?" Mack asked.

"Who knows? We're at a tangent here, of course. We'll have to follow developments in both worlds—and along other tangencies."

"The job is endless, isn't it?" said Elspeth thoughtfully.

"Endless!" said Orrin Lewis.

"And it was through you that we got into this," said Elspeth.

"That's part of my job—selecting newcomers. They are always teamed on first assignments. Later, like Juana, they learn to work alone."

"Tell me," said the girl. "What happens if a person on one world meets her counterpart in another?"

"That's bothered me, too," said Mack unexpectedly.

"It happens, of course," Lewis said, smiling again. "For instance, Elly, there's a you on this world. You're a very famous London poetess."

"Then that book of poems was hers as well as mine?" The girl felt utter astonishment. Her verse was such a definite part of *her*. But Orrin Lewis shook his head.

"No—parallels simply aren't that close," he told her. "We had *your* poems specially printed for Christine Roosevelt. I saw to that little job myself."

"May I ask you just how we happened to be selected for this job?" Elspeth inquired. Mack's eyes silently seconded her curiosity.

"Naturally you have a right to know," said Lewis. "There are some of us—more or less broken-down veteran transferees—in key positions here and abroad who do the bulk of the picking and choosing. In general, we look for two qualities—integrity and flexibility. Both are needed in this work."

HE PAUSED thoughtfully, added, "Then there is the little matter of basic character and background. You, for instance—" he looked directly at Elspeth—"have the natural flexibility of a person brought up to regard life through the detachment of a subjective career. And you have proven yourself tough enough to stick to your guns in spite of hardship and personal isolation.

"Mack, on the other hand—" Lewis studied the photographer—"has acquired similar qualities from the opposite end. He has been banged into flexibility by trying to meet life as it came along."

"You can say that again," said Mack, putting down his glass.

"I try to have a little group on the staff of *Picture Week* ready for these assignments, but I never seem to be able to find enough," the editor went on. "You two were all I had to send on this assignment." He looked at his watch, added, "It's getting late and I'm taking you to the Kansas transfer point tomorrow. Are you ready with the disintegrator-shield, Mack?"

"I've got samples and specifications with me," Mack replied.

"Good," said Orrin Lewis. "Things are stalled in Columbia until you get there with them. You'll both want to be in on the grand finale there, I suppose. You've done well, both of you, especially on a first assignment. But remember, *Picture Week* still expects a good feature on the Hatteras Keys. You'll be returned there as soon as your Columbian job is wrapped up."

"I've got a question," said Mack. "I'd like to know why it is so important that we doctor up these other worlds."

"You have," said Orrin Lewis to the photographer, "with your almost infallible super-simplicity put your well-grimed thumb on the very nub of the matter, Mack."

"Huh?" said Mack stupidly.

"You've hit the nail on the thumb," said Elspeth.

"Correct," Orrin Lewis told her. "Un-

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fortunately, it so happens that if any of the worlds is irretrievably damaged—or destroyed—it will have a singularly deleterious effect upon the entire quantum fabric which holds the various universes in a stasis of sorts.

"If this world manages to destroy itself it will put a gap in the fabric of existence itself—a gap whose filling will affect to its disadvantage each of the myriad other worlds that co-exist with it. It is part of the job of the Watchers and their aids to see to it that no such jarring catastrophe comes to pass. Understand?"

"It's a little frightening," said Elspeth, considering the magnitude of the entire idea.

"Frightening? It's a job!" said the editor. "Once again, I hope you have prepared something to cover your original assignment. It is important for all of us to keep up our work in our own worlds."

"We've done what we could," said Mack and for some reason Elspeth was grateful for his having included her in his remark. Lewis looked at them thoughtfully before he spoke again.

"Keep your eyes open—your job here is still undone. And Mack—have you been taking pictures on these other worlds?"

"A few," said the photographer, turning red. "I've been pretty busy, Mr. Lewis."

"Well, take all you can from here in," said the editor. "If film here is not usable in your camera, get a new camera. You have enough money?"

"Juana held the purse," said Elspeth, realizing that they were broke. Orrin Lewis drew out a bulging wallet, tossed a small sheaf of alien bills on the table. "This should cover anything and everything you run into," he told them. He shook his head. "We're going to miss Juana Brooks. If the two of you become as able as she was alone, you'll be more than doing your jobs."

"Then we're in this from now on?" said Mack, his eyebrows rising as he silently counted the money. "Thanks, Mr. Lewis."

Lewis dismissed his thanks with a gesture, said, "It's up to you, of course. But we don't select persons who are apt not to want to go on."

"I'm sold," said Mack. Lewis looked at Elspeth, who nodded slowly. Tears filled her eyes and her throat ached as she thought of Juana, who had moved so surely and vividly and died so tragically. Lewis lifted a hand in farewell and went into his room.

They arose early the following morning, were taken directly from the bungalow to the airfield, where a small cabin plane awaited them. To Elspeth's surprise Orrin Lewis himself took the controls. Before they got going he said, "You'll board your train in Topeka—same transfer point you used coming into this world. It's all arranged. You'll be met in Kansas City this time and flown to Norman in a Pipit. Got that?"

"Got it," said Mack and Elspeth nodded. Seconds later they were in the air, climbing rapidly.

ALONE in the rear car of the train both of them missed Juana increasingly—yet neither mentioned her name. They sat side by side through the blackness of transfer, journeyed with little conversation to Kansas City in an ornate Columbian rocket train. There they transferred with considerable secrecy to the first Columbian-built Pipit they had seen, and shortly afterward left the highway south of the metropolis to fly to Reed Weston's Headquarters.

Their arrival with the asbestos-glass fabric, gave the stalling three-way negotiations a new lease on life. Again Elspeth found time heavy on her hands for a couple of weeks. Mack seemed as busy as ever and Marshal Henry was seldom in headquarters, his duties taking him further south in his efforts to negotiate a satisfactory treaty.

Then one night, very late, he summoned her from her quarters in the bar-

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racks. He embraced her almost roughly, said, "Elly, darling, we've done it. When that material you and Mack brought us stood by, they knuckled under. I wanted you to be the first to know. We'll meet again tomorrow—in New Orleans."

"Thanks, Johnny," she said and for some reason tears were close behind her eyes. "Thanks, Johnny—I think it's wonderful."

It took her a long long time to get to sleep.

The next day, shortly after nine o'clock, the Reed Weston party took off for New Orleans in four Pipits—the original well-worn vehicle that had brought them there and three shining new copies that had only just finished their tests.

Mack was flying one of the new models—the one which carried Reed Weston and two of the great scientists who had planned to accompany him on his flight from Earth. Marshal Henry himself flew the second, containing high Rebel military leaders. Their pilot to Natchez, first Columbian to master Pipit flight, flew the third, also celebrity-laden. Elspeth handled the fourth, which apparently held the leading legal lights the rebels were calling on.

All of them, Elspeth noted, were dressed in simple khaki work clothes—with shirts open at the neck and decorations and insignia of rank at a minimum. Elspeth herself, at Reed Weston's behest, was similarly attired. She wondered a little at such ultra-simplicity, then dismissed it from her mind.

"This—isn't bad, is it?" the gray-haired and distinguished attorney beside her said, relaxing a death-grip on his briefcase as they leveled off in flight.

"You were going to Mars—and you let a little flight like this bother you," gibed Elspeth to put them more at ease. "We'll be over New Orleans by eleven o'clock.

"It's a matter of getting used to the idea," said another legal light from the back seat. "It's so new."

"Relax and enjoy it," said Elspeth. "The water's fine."

It was a perfect sunny day and their height and motion made the heat unnoticeable. In loose diamond formation they flew southeast to the Mississippi, then followed the densely populated area that marked the course of the great brown river to the capital, cutting bird-fashion across curve and bayou in direct line.

ACCORDING to plan they landed at eleven-five in the great plaza before the domed white capitol at the western end of the tremendous moving boulevard that was Canal Street. At once an armed guard of khaki-clad Weston men, who had entered New Orleans in advance according to treaty, moved up in a hollow square to surround the vehicles.

The emissaries from Norman lined up irregularly in front of their Pipits and Elspeth, looking around her, found herself bedazzled by the splendor of the scene unfolded in the plaza. It was far and away the most brilliant display she had ever viewed.

Imperial and Columbian leaders, in red, in blue, in green, in yellow, in lavender, their uniforms weighed down with gold braid, buttons, medals and ribbons, cast coruscating reflections as they stood in an immense human cluster in the sunlight on the capitol steps. It was like returning to some Napoleonic victory review.

On one side of the square a Columbian guard of honor was lined up in impeccable array—their uniforms almost matching in magnificence those of the notables on the steps. On the plaza's other side an Imperial escort was aligned, equally gorgeous. Behind them and in back of a thick police cordon at the rear of the plaza were the people. Hundreds of thousands of them crowded against the barriers of the guards; other thousands clustered in windows and on roof-tops.

At first, as she compared the casual khaki clothes of her own group with all

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the magnificence and panoply about them, Elspeth felt ill at ease. But when the deep-throated roar of the multitude rose at Reed Weston's first appearance, as it continued and mounted until it beat almost unbearably upon her eardrums, she realized how shrewd the Weston folk had been.

The workmanlike simplicity and comfort of their clothes provided a contrast to the pomp of the others which no competing fuss and feathers could have been hoped to do. Catching Mack's eye in the second row beside her, Elspeth whispered with sudden insight, "Was this Juana's idea?"

Mack nodded, replied, "On the nose, Elly. She told me she got it from something that happened on a battleship not so long ago back in her own world. Don't they look hot in those stiff collars and braid?"

Juana, Elspeth decided, might have rated herself a mere messenger girl but she had certainly been worth her weight in ice-cold drinks. The heat of the plaza pavement was a living thing as the little Weston party walked across it toward the capitol steps.

FROM then on things became a bit confused for Elspeth. She stood by in a dream while interminable speeches were made by the leading parties concerned. She had an impression of President Wilkinson, tall and sallow and a trifle unhealthy, making awkward little gestures to accompany his speech of concession—the word surrender had been scrupulously avoided by all parties.

She remembered seeing some woman—a mere shapeless black speck—fall from a window high in a building on one side of the plaza. She remembered Reed Weston, incisive and assured in his triumph—the Mexican Emperor, a plump red-faced little man, making extravagant motions with his arms as he talked.

Particularly she would always remember Marshal Henry, calm, assured, deep-voiced, natural, the greatest idol of them all to the assembled hundreds of thousands. What he said she did not hear—could not hear, thanks to her position behind the speakers. But somehow she could sense the assurance, the quiet confidence of him, sense it in the reactions of the mighty horde he was addressing.

Later, much later, she had a brief moment alone with him in the Presidential Palace. It was in some sort of conservatory off the main ballroom in which a huge peace ball was being given. In some way he managed to have her brought there, to have the door guarded by trusted subordinates. Her hands seemed to fly automatically into his, to lose themselves in their greatness.

"Elly," he said and his voice was a trifle husky, perhaps from the strain of speaking throughout the day. "Elly, is it true you are leaving us?"

She tried to speak but could not, for emotion was high within her. She could only bite down hard on her lower lip and nod.

"But why?" he asked her. "Why when we are just beginning?"

"I have to," she said and speech, rediscovered, came in a gush. "I know I shouldn't tell you but I know you'll keep it a secret—always. I'm not from this world at all. Neither is Mack or the Pipit or Juana. We came from somewhere else to help you and now we have to leave for our own world."

"You're feeling all right?" he asked her. "The heat, the—"

"Dammit, I'm fine except I feel horrible," she almost shouted at him. "Don't you know what parallel time-tracks are?"

"Parallel time-tracks?" He looked startled, incredulous, then almost frightened in turn. Finally he nodded. "Yes, Elly, I'm afraid I do—in theory at any rate."

"But it's not theory—it's *true!*" she wailed and burst into tears against the vast expanse of his chest.

Late the following afternoon Mack and Elspeth found themselves once

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again in North Carolina, close to the Keys and to the inlet which was their destination. It was dusk when some counterpart of Corey made his boat fast to the trim white pier on Spindrift Key and helped them sling their luggage upon it.

They trudged up the path alone to the lovely old mansion and were ushered by a servant to the time-patinaed study where Mr. Horelle, looking more alabastrine than ever, still sat behind his desk. He greeted them with a smile of genuine warmth.

"You have done extremely well," he told them both. "The other Watchers and I are more than satisfied. In time you will more than make up for our loss." He was referring to Juana and both of them knew it. It was, in fact, the only reference he made to the girl of whom he had obviously been so fond. He was a very old man who kept his memories locked within himself.

HE QUERIED them about their adventures, eyed Mack's pictures with interest through a pair of bifocal glasses that seemed continually to be slipping down his high-bridged nose. It was not until after dinner, a sumptuous meal in which red snapper and immense turkey filets were the pièces de résistance, that Elspeth asked him the question which was troubling her most.

"Mr. Horelle," she said, "I feel as though we have perhaps been lucky enough to help two other worlds. But what about our own? We have our share of problems."

"In coming through your assignment," he told them, "as magnificently as you both have, you have been helping all worlds. But surely you know the answer to your own question. What is the chief problem of your world now?"

"Our population is outstripping our ability to produce the goods they need for decent living," said Elspeth wonderingly. "But I'm afraid I don't see—"

"Got it!" said Mack. "Elly, those assembly lines, those super-factories, that mass production General Curtis talked about to me. If that isn't the answer I'll eat my infrared camera for dessert."

"I hardly think you'll be threatened with such a gastric necessity," said Mr. Horelle, smiling beneath his beard at the photographer's quick enthusiasm. "Of course that's the answer." He paused then, looked keenly from one to the other of them, registering the changes, the signs of growth, that his keen wisdom perceived.

"Yet I think you'll find you've brought back something more than that," he went on. "Something more personal—vastly more personal—of course. That, again, you must learn for yourselves."

Elspeth slept soundly that night between soft Irish linen sheets. When she awakened she knew she had been transferred again. Her surroundings remained the same—apparently the mansion was one spot which was unaffected by transfers—but she could sense it in herself. Perhaps her subconscious mind retained memory of the darkness. At any rate, she knew.

Mack knew, too. He said nothing about it at breakfast but she had become closely enough attuned to the photographer during the weeks just past to understand much of what he thought and felt without need for words. They were lingering over coffee when a pert young housemaid came in and told them the boat was waiting. Elspeth found herself wondering what world the girl came from.

It was bright morning sunlight outside. There was dew on the grass and the birds were singing and the insects just beginning their diurnal chants. Elspeth and Mack strolled side by side down the wharf, and there Corey was awaiting them with his smelly old power fisherman.

"Told you I'd come back for you," he said with a twitch of the lips that was apparently supposed to pass for a smile. "Took you quite some while though. Have an interesting time?"

"You have no idea, Corey!" Elspeth

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told him. Seconds later they were putting toward the point around which lay the little Carolina town. It was their world and the poet felt a great sense of peace and security wrap itself around her.

Even the ugly little town had a homelike look. It was good to see the highway sign at the head of the pier with its crown and lion and unicorn, it was good to see the local constable in his round-topped helmet, gnawing his mustache ends as he stood in front of the dry-grocer's shop. It was good to know that she was part of a world in which what had briefly been the United States was again a vital part of the benevolent British Commonwealth of Nations.

"A president is all very well," said Mack, walking toward the garage, bags in hand, "but I'd rather have a queen. It's more—permanent somehow."

"I know," she told him. "I liked President Roosevelt but still—he lacked something our Queen Bess has. It's hard to define."

"Yeah—and that little man they had between Roosevelts Two and Three," said Mack. "What was his name—Shuman—Newman? Imagine having a Dapper Dan like that in charge of a great country!"

"It wasn't Shuman but it was something like it," said Elspeth frowning. "Those shirts!" She shrugged and gave it up, glanced at Mack, saw that he had stopped dead on the garage threshold. Following his gaze she saw that by some magic of the interworld service the Pipit was back.

It had a number of dents and scrapes that had not been there at the start of its jaunt into the world of Columbia. The garageman came up, looking relieved. "Scared me near out of my wits," he told them. "First the car disappears, then you folk do. Then, blimey, back she comes—and then so do you. Well, all's well that ends well, I always say. She's fit as a fiddle."

Mack slung their gear into the back, pulled out his wallet and paid the baffled garageman, who was still scratching his head when they drove out onto the bumpy Main Street of the village. Corey, who was approaching the bar-restaurant in which their adventure had begun, waved a farewell as they drove past him.

Out of town Mack took the Pipit up and headed along the East Air-Traffic Lane toward New York. Illogically Elspeth found herself filled with sudden nostalgia for the cure-all toothpowder of Columbia, for Marshal Henry, for Christine Roosevelt and the crisp amiability of General Curtis.

She glanced at Mack covertly, saw that his eyes too held a faraway look. She had a close idea of what he was recalling and a sudden pang of unwanted jealousy thrust its blade through her—or was it truly unwanted? She didn't know.

"Wonder what the old gaffer back on the Key meant when he said we'd got something more personal out of it?" Mack asked her.

Elspeth glanced at him again, saw the integrity that shone through the rough-hewn contours of his face, the honesty of his mouth and forehead. She thought of the tie that existed between them, of what the future must hold in store, of Mack's new-found adaptability, of her own loss of snobbishness, both intellectual and social.

"Integrity," she muttered. Then, at Mack's lifted eyebrow. "I think I know, Mack, but it's hard to say. You'll have to find it out by yourself I'm afraid."

He uttered a short, sharp and very masculine curse word. And Elspeth smiled silently to herself at the intimacy the word implied. Mack would find the way. He couldn't help himself now. The bond was too strongly forged.

She leaned out the window to watch a flock of gulls dip past between a pair of cotton-wool clouds.

Next Issue: THE STAR WATCHERS, a Novel by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

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The MASQUERADE

Privacy, like diamonds, is where you find it—

and in this universe the two don't go together!

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ON DICANTROPUS

By JACK VANCE

TWO puzzles dominated the life of Jim Root. The first, the pyramid out in the desert, tickled and prodded his curiosity, while the second, the problem of getting along with his wife, kept him keyed to a high pitch of anxiety and apprehension. At the moment the problem had crowded the mystery of the pyramid into a lost alley of his brain.

Eyeing his wife uneasily Root decided that she was in for another of her fits. The symptoms were familiar—a jerking over of the pages of an old magazine, her tense back and bolt-upright posture, her pointed silence, the compression at the corners of her mouth.

With no preliminary motion she threw the magazine across the room, jumped to her feet. She walked to the doorway, stood looking out across the plain, fingers tapping on the sill. Root heard her voice, low, as if not meant for him to hear.

"Another day of this and I'll lose what little's left of my mind."

Root approached warily. If he could be compared to a Labrador retriever, then his wife was a black panther—a woman tall and well-covered with sumptuous flesh. She had black flowing hair and black flashing eyes. She lacquered her fingernails and wore black lounge pajamas even on dessicated deserted inhospitable Dicantropus.

"Now, dear," said Root, "take it easy. Certainly it's not as bad as all that."

SHE whirled and Root was surprised by the intensity in her eyes. "It's not bad, you say? Very well for you to talk—*you* don't care for anything human to begin with. I'm sick of it. Do you hear? I want to go back to Earth! I never want to see another planet in my whole life. I never want to hear the word archaeology, I never want to see a rock or a bone or a microscope—"

She flung a wild gesture around the room that included a number of rocks, bones, microscopes, as well as books, specimens in bottles, photographic equipment, a number of native artifacts.

Root tried to soothe her with logic. "Very few people are privileged to live on an outside planet, dear."

"They're in their right minds. If I'd known what it was like, I'd never have come out here." Her voice dropped once more. "Same old dirt every day, same stinking natives, same vile canned food, nobody to talk to—"

Root uncertainly picked up and laid down his pipe. "Lie down, dear," he said with unconvincing confidence. "Take a nap! Things will look different when you wake up."

Stabbing him with a look she turned and strode out into the blue-white glare of the sun. Root followed more slowly, bringing Barbara's sun-helmet and adjusting his own. Automatically he cocked an eye up the antenna, the reason for the station and his own presence, Dicantropus being a relay point for ULR messages between Clave-II and Polaris. The antenna stood as usual, polished metal tubing four hundred feet high.

BARBARA halted by the shore of the lake, a brackish pond in the neck of an old volcano, one of the few natural bodies of water on the planet. Root silently joined her, handed her her sun-helmet. She jammed it on her head, walked away.

Root shrugged, watched her as she

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circled the pond to a clump of feather-fronded cycads. She flung herself down, relaxed into a sulky lassitude, her back to a big gray-green trunk, and seemed intent on the antics of the natives—owlish leather-gray little creatures popping back and forth into holes in their mound.

This was a hillock a quarter-mile long, covered with spine-scrub and a rusty black creeper. With one exception it was the only eminence as far as the eye could reach, horizon to horizon, across the baked helnless expanse of the desert.

The exception was the stepped pyramid, the mystery of which irked Root. It was built of massive granite blocks, set without mortar but cut so carefully that hardly a crack could be seen. Early on his arrival Root had climbed all over the pyramid, unsuccessfully seeking entrance.

When finally he brought out his atomite torch to melt a hole in the granite a sudden swarm of natives pushed him back and in the pidgin of Dicantropus gave him to understand that entrance was forbidden. Root desisted with reluctance, and had been consumed by curiosity ever since . . .

Who had built the pyramid? In style it resembled the *ziggurats* of ancient Assyria. The granite had been set with a skill unknown, so far as Root could see, to the natives. But if not the natives—who? A thousand times Root had chased the question through his brain. Were the natives debased relics of a once-civilized race? If so, why were there no other ruins? And what was the purpose of the pyramid? A temple? A mausoleum? A treasure-house? Perhaps it was entered from below by a tunnel.

As Root stood on the shore of the lake, looking across the desert, the questions flicked automatically through his mind though without their usual pungency. At the moment the problem of soothing his wife lay heavy on his mind. He debated a few moments whether or not to join her; perhaps she had cooled off and might like some company. He circled the pond and stood looking down at her glossy black hair.

"I came over here to be alone," she said without accent and the indifference chilled him more than an insult.

"I thought—that maybe you might like to talk," said Root. "I'm very sorry, Barbara, that you're unhappy."

Still she said nothing, sitting with her head pressed back against the tree-trunk.

"We'll go home on the next supply ship," Root said. "Let's see, there should be one—"

"Three months and three days," said Barbara flatly.

Root shifted his weight, watched her from the corner of his eye. This was a new manifestation. Tears, recriminations, anger—there had been plenty of these before.

"We'll try to keep amused till then," he said desperately. "Let's think up some games to play. Maybe badminton—or we could do more swimming."

Barbara snorted in sharp sarcastic laughter. "With things like that popping up around you?" She gestured to one of the Dicantrops who had lazily paddled close. She narrowed her eyes, leaned forward. "What's that he's got around his neck?"

Root peered. "Looks like a diamond necklace more than anything else."

"My Lord!" whispered Barbara.

Root walked down to the water's edge. "Hey, boy!" The Dicantrop turned his great velvety eyes in their sockets. "Come here!"

Barbara joined him as the native paddled close.

"Let's see what you've got there," said Root, leaning close to the necklace.

"Why, those are *beautiful!*" breathed his wife.

Root chewed his lip thoughtfully. "They certainly look like diamonds. The setting might be platinum or iridium. Hey, boy, where did you get these?"

The Dicantrop paddled backward. "We find."

"Where?"

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The Dicantrop blew froth from his breath-holes but it seemed to Root as if his eyes had glanced momentarily toward the pyramid.

"You find in big pile of rock?"

"No," said the native and sank below the surface.

Barbara returned to her seat by the tree, frowned at the water. Root joined her. For a moment there was silence. Then Barbara said, "That pyramid must be full of things like that!"

Root made a deprecatory noise in his throat. "Oh—I suppose it's possible."

"Why don't you go out and see?"

"I'd like to—but you know it would make trouble."

"You could go out at night."

"No," said Root uncomfortably. "It's really not right. If they want to keep the thing closed up and secret it's their business. After all it belongs to them."

"How do you know it does?" his wife insisted, with a hard and sharp directness. "They didn't build it and probably never put those diamonds there." Scorn crept into her voice. "Are you afraid?"

"Yes," said Root. "I'm afraid. There's an awful lot of them and only two of us. That's one objection. But the other, most important—"

Barbara let herself slump back against the trunk. "I don't want to hear it."

ROOT, now angry himself, said nothing for a minute. Then, thinking of the three months and three days till the arrival of the supply ship, he said, "It's no use our being disagreeable. It just makes it harder on both of us. I made a mistake bringing you out here and I'm sorry. I thought you'd enjoy the experience, just the two of us alone on a strange planet—"

Barbara was not listening to him. Her mind was elsewhere.

"Barbara!"

"Shh!" she snapped. "Be still! Listen!"

He jerked his head up. The air vibrated with a far *thrum-m-m-m.* Root sprang out into the sunlight, scanned the sky. The sound grew louder. There was no question about it, a ship was dropping down from space.

Root ran into the station, flipped open the communicator—but there were no signals coming in. He returned to the door and watched as the ship sank down to a bumpy rough landing two hundred yards from the station.

It was a small ship, the type rich men sometimes used as private yachts, but old and battered. It sat in a quiver of hot air, its tubes creaking and hissing as they cooled. Root approached.

The dogs on the port began to turn, the port swung open. A man stood in the opening. For a moment he teetered on loose legs, then fell headlong.

Root, springing forward, caught him before he struck ground. "Barbara!" Root called. His wife approached. "Take his feet. We'll carry him inside. He's sick."

They laid him on the couch and his eyes opened halfway.

"What's the trouble?" asked Root. "Where do you feel sick?"

"My legs are like ice," husked the man. "My shoulders ache. I can't breathe."

"Wait till I look in the book," muttered Root. He pulled out the Official Spaceman's Self-help Guide, traced down the symptoms. He looked across to the sick man. "You been anywhere near Alphard?"

"Just came from there," panted the man.

"Looks like you got a dose of Lyma's Virus. A shot of mycosetin should fix you up, according to the book."

He inserted an ampule into the hypospray, pressed the tip to his patient's arm, pushed the plunger home. "That should do it—according to the Guide."

"Thanks," said his patient. "I feel better already." He closed his eyes. Root stood up, glanced at Barbara. She was scrutinizing the man with a peculiar calculation. Root looked down again, seeing the man for the first time

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He was young, perhaps thirty, thin but strong with a tight nervous muscularity. His face was lean, almost gaunt, his skin very bronzed. He had short black hair, heavy black eyebrows, a long jaw, a thin high nose.

Root turned away. Glancing at his wife he foresaw the future with a sick certainty.

He washed out the hypospray, returned the Guide to the rack, all with a sudden self-conscious awkwardness. When he turned around, Barbara was staring at him with wide thoughtful eyes. Root slowly left the room.

A day later Marville Landry was on his feet and when he had shaved and changed his clothes there was no sign of the illness. He was by profession a mining engineer, so he revealed to Root, en route to a contract on Thuban XIV.

The virus had struck swiftly and only by luck had he noticed the proximity of Dicantropus on his charts. Rapidly weakening, he had been forced to decelerate so swiftly and land so uncertainly that he feared his fuel was low. And indeed, when they went out to check, they found only enough fuel to throw the ship a hundred feet into the air.

Landry shook his head ruefully. "And there's a ten-million-munit contract waiting for me on Thuban Fourteen."

Said Root dismally, "The supply packet's due in three months."

Landry winced. "Three months—in this hell-hole? That's murder." They returned to the station. "How do you stand it here?"

Barbara heard him. "We don't. I've been on the verge of hysterics every minute the last six months. Jim"—she made a wry grimace toward her husband—"he's got his bones and rocks and the antenna. He's not too much company."

"Maybe I can help out," Landry offered airily.

"Maybe," she said with a cool blank glance at Root. Presently she left the room, walking more gracefully now, with an air of mysterious gaiety.

Dinner that evening was a gala event. As soon as the sun took its blue glare past the horizon Barbara and Landry carried a table down to the lake and there they set it with all the splendor the station could afford. With no word to Root she pulled the cork on the gallon of brandy he had been nursing for a year and served generous highballs with canned lime-juice, Maraschino cherries and ice.

For a space, with the candles glowing and evoking lambent ghosts in the highballs, even Root was gay. The air was wonderfully cool and the sands of the desert spread white and clean as damask out into the dimness. So they feasted on canned fowl and mushrooms and frozen fruit and drank deep of Root's brandy, and across the pond the natives watched from the dark.

AND presently, while Root grew sleepy and dull, Landry became gay, and Barbara sparkled—the complete hostess, charming, witty and the Dicantropus night tinkled and throbbed with her laughter. She and Landry toasted each other and exchanged laughing comments at Root's expense—who now sat slumping, stupid, half-asleep. Finally he lurched to his feet and stumbled off to the station.

On the table by the lake the candles burnt low. Barbara poured more brandy. Their voices became murmurs and at last the candles guttered.

In spite of any human will to hold time in blessed darkness morning came and brought a day of silence and averted eyes. Then other days and nights succeeded each other and time proceeded as usual. And there was now little pretense at the station.

Barbara frankly avoided Root and when she had occasion to speak her voice was one of covert amusement. Landry, secure, confident, aquiline, had a trick of sitting back and looking from one to the other as if inwardly chuckling over the whole episode. Root pre-

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served a studied calm and spoke in a subdued tone which conveyed no meaning other than the sense of his words.

There were a few minor clashes. Entering the bathroom one morning Root found Landry shaving with his razor. Without heat Root took the shaver out of Landry's hand.

For an instant Landry stared blankly, then wrenched his mouth into the beginnings of a snarl.

Root smiled almost sadly. "Don't get me wrong, Landry. There's a difference between a razor and a woman. The razor is mine. A human being can't be owned. Leave my personal property alone."

Landry's eyebrows rose. "Man, you're crazy." He turned away. "Heat's got you."

The days went past and now they were unchanging as before but unchanging with a new leaden tension. Words became even fewer and dislike hung like tattered tinsel. Every motion, every line of the body, became a detestable sight, an evil which the other flaunted deliberately.

Root burrowed almost desperately into his rocks and bones, peered through his microscope, made a thousand measurements, a thousand notes. Landry and Barbara fell into the habit of taking long walks in the evening, usually out to the pyramid, then slowly back across the quiet cool sand.

The mystery of the pyramid suddenly fascinated Landry and he even questioned Root.

"I've no idea," said Root. "Your guess is as good as mine. All I know is that the natives don't want anyone trying to get into it."

"Mph," said Landry, gazing across the desert. "No telling what's inside. Barbara said one of the natives was wearing a diamond necklace worth thousands."

"I suppose anything's possible," said Root. He had noticed the acquisitive twitch to Landry's mouth, the hook of the fingers. "You'd better not get any ideas. I don't want any trouble with the natives. Remember that, Landry."

Landry asked with seeming mildness, "Do you have any authority over that pyramid?"

"No," said Root shortly. "None whatever."

"It's not—yours?" Landry sardonically accented the word and Root remembered the incident of the shaver.

"No."

"Then," said Landry, rising, "mind your own business."

He left the room.

During the day Root noticed Landry and Barbara deep in conversation and he saw Landry rummaging through his ship. At dinner no single word was spoken.

As usual, when the afterglow had died to a cool blue glimmer, Barbara and Landry strolled off into the desert. But tonight Root watched after them and he noticed a pack on Landry's shoulders and Barbara seemed to be carrying a handbag.

He paced back and forth, puffing furiously at his pipe. Landry was right—it was none of his business. If there were profit, he wanted none of it. And if there were danger, it would strike only those who provoked it. Or would it? Would he, Root, be automatically involved because of his association with Landry and Barbara? To the Dicantrops, a man was a man, and if one man needed punishment, all men did likewise.

WOULD there be—killing? Root puffed at his pipe, chewed the stem, blew smoke out in gusts between his teeth. In a way he was responsible for Barbara's safety. He had taken her from a sheltered life on Earth. He shook his head, put down his pipe, went to the drawer where he kept his gun. It was gone.

Root looked vacantly across the room. Landry had it. No telling how long since he'd taken it. Root went to the kitchen, found a meat-axe, tucked it inside his jumper, set out across the desert.

He made a wide circle in order to ap-

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proach the pyramid from behind. The air was quiet and dark and cool as water in an old well. The crisp sand sounded faintly under his feet. Above him spread the sky and the sprinkle of the thousand stars. Somewhere up there was the Sun and old Earth.

The pyramid loomed suddenly large and now he saw a glow, heard the muffled clinking of tools. He approached quietly, halted several hundred feet out in the darkness, stood watching, alert to all sounds.

Landry's atomite torch ate at the granite. As he cut Barbara hooked the detached chunks out into the sand. From time to time Landry stood back, sweating and gasping from radiated heat.

A foot he cut into the granite, two feet, three feet, and Root heard the excited murmur of voices. They were through, into empty space. Careless of watching behind them they sidled through the hole they had cut. Root, more wary, listened, strove to pierce the darkness . . . Nothing.

He sprang forward, hastened to the hole, peered within. The yellow gleam of Landry's torch swept past his eyes. He crept into the hole, pushed his head out into emptiness. The air was cold, smelled of dust and damp rock.

Landry and Barbara stood fifty feet away. In the desultory flash of the lamp Root saw stone walls and a stone floor. The pyramid appeared to be an empty shell. Why then were the natives so particular? He heard Landry's voice, edged with bitterness.

"Not a damn thing, not even a mummy for your husband to gloat over."

Root could sense Barbara shuddering. "Let's go. It gives me the shivers. It's like a dungeon."

"Just a minute, we might as well make sure . . . Hm." He was playing the light on the walls. "That's peculiar."

"What's peculiar?"

"It looks like the stone was sliced with a torch. Notice how it's fused here on the inside . . ."

Root squinted, trying to see. "Strange," he heard Landry mutter. "Outside it's chipped, inside it's cut by a torch. It doesn't look so very old here inside, either."

"The air would preserve it," suggested Barbara dubiously.

"I suppose so—still, old places look old. There's dust and a kind of dullness. This looks raw."

"I don't understand how that could be."

"I don't either. There's something funny somewhere."

Root stiffened. Sound from without? Shuffle of splay feet in the sand—he started to back out. Something pushed him, he sprawled forward, fell. The bright eye of Landry's torch stared in his direction. "What's that?" came a hard voice. "Who's there?"

Root looked over his shoulder. The light passed over him, struck a dozen gray bony forms. They stood quietly just inside the hole, their eyes like balls of black plush.

Root gained his feet. "Hah!" cried Landry. "So *you're* here too."

"Not because I want to be," returned Root grimly.

Landry edged slowly forward, keeping his light on the Dicantrops. He asked Root sharply, "Are these lads dangerous?"

Root appraised the natives. "I don't know."

"Stay still," said one of these in the front rank. "Stay still." His voice was a deep croak.

"Stay still, *hell!*" exclaimed Landry. "We're leaving. There's nothing here I want. Get out of the way." He stepped forward.

"Stay still . . . We kill . . ."

Landry paused.

"What's the trouble now?" interposed Root anxiously. "Surely there's no harm in looking. There's nothing here."

"That is why we kill. Nothing here, now you know. Now you look other place. When you think this place important, then you not look other place. We kill, new man come, he think this

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place important."

Landry muttered. "Do you get what he's driving at?"

Root said slowly, "I don't know for sure." He addressed the Dicantrop. "We don't care about your secrets. You've no reason to hide things from us."

The native jerked his head. "Then why do you come here? You look for secrets."

Barbara's voice came from behind. "What *is* your secret? Diamonds?"

The native jerked his head again. Amusement? Anger? His emotions, unearthly, could be matched by no earthly words. "Diamonds are nothing—rocks."

"I'd like a carload," Landry muttered under his breath.

"Now look here," said Root persuasively. "You let us out and we won't pry into any of your secrets. It was wrong of us to break in and I'm sorry it happened. We'll repair the damage—"

THE Dicantrop made a faint sputtering sound. "You do not understand. You tell other men—pyramid is nothing. Then other men look all around for other thing. They bother, look, look, look. All this no good. You die, everything go like before."

"There's too much talk," said Landry viciously, "and I don't like the sound of it. Let's get out of here." He pulled out Root's gun. "Come on," he snapped at Root, "let's move."

To the natives, "Get out of the way or I'll do some killing myself!"

A rustle of movement from the natives, a thin excited whimper.

"We've got to rush 'em," shouted Landry. "If they get outside they can knock us over as we leave. Let's *go!*"

He sprang forward and Root was close behind. Landry used the gun as a club and Root used his fists and the Dicantrops rattled like cornstalks against the walls. Landry erupted through the hole. Root pushed Barbara through and, kicking back at the natives behind him, struggled out into the air.

Landry's momentum had carried him away from the pyramid, out into a seething mob of Dicantrops. Root, following more slowly, pressed his back to the granite. He sensed the convulsive movement in the wide darkness. "The whole colony must be down here," he shouted into Barbara's ear. For a minute he was occupied with the swarming natives, keeping Barbara behind him as much as possible. The first ledge of granite was about shoulder height.

"Step on my hands," he panted. "I'll shove you up."

"But—Landry!" came Barbara's choked wail.

"Look at that crowd!" bit Root furiously. "We can't do anything." A sudden rush of small bony forms almost overwhelmed him. "Hurry up!"

Whimpering she stepped into his clasped hands. He thrust her up on the first ledge. Shaking off the clawing natives which had leapt on him, he jumped, scrambled up beside her. "Now run!" he shouted in her ear and she fled down the ledge.

From the darkness came a violent cry. "Root! *Root!* For *God's* sake—they've got me down—" Another hoarse yell, rising to a scream of agony. Then silence.

"Hurry!" said Root. They came to the far corner of the pyramid. "Jump down," panted Root. "Down to the ground."

"Landry!" moaned Barbara, teetering at the edge.

"Get *down!*" snarled Root. He thrust her down to the white sand and, seizing her hand, ran across the desert, back toward the station. A minute or so later, with pursuit left behind, he slowed to a trot.

"We should go back," cried Barbara. "Are you going to leave him to those devils?"

Root was silent a moment. Then, choosing his words, he said, "I told him to stay away from the place. Anything that happens to him is his own fault. And whatever it is, it's already happened. There's nothing we can do now."

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A dark hulk shouldered against the sky—Landry's ship.

"Let's get in here," said Root. "We'll be safer than in the station."

He helped her into the ship, clamped tight the port. *"Phew!"* He shook his head. "Never thought it would come to this."

He climbed into the pilot's seat, looked out across the desert. Barbara huddled somewhere behind him, sobbing softly.

An hour passed, during which they said no word. Then, without warning, a fiery orange ball rose from the hill across the pond, drifted toward the station. Root blinked, jerked upright in his seat. He scrambled for the ship's machine-gun, yanked at the trigger—without result.

When at last he found and threw off the safety the orange ball hung over the station and Root held his fire. The ball brushed against the antenna—a tremendous explosion spattered to every corner of vision. It seared Root's eyes, threw him to the deck, rocked the ship, left him dazed and half-conscious.

Barbara lay moaning. Root hauled himself to his feet. A seared pit, a tangle of metal, showed where the station had stood. Root dazedly slumped into the seat, started the fuel pump, plunged home the catalyzers. The boat quivered, bumped a few feet along the ground. The tubes sputtered, wheezed.

Root looked at the fuel gauge, looked again. The needle pointed to zero, a fact which Root had known but forgotten. He cursed his own stupidity. Their presence in the ship might have gone ignored if he had not called attention to it.

UP FROM the hill floated another orange ball. Root jumped for the machinegun, sent out a burst of explosive pellets. Again the roar and the blast and the whole top of the hill was blown off, revealing what appeared to be a smooth strata of black rock.

Root looked over his shoulder to Barbara. "This is it."

"Wha—what do you mean?"

"We can't get away. Sooner or later —" His voice trailed off. He reached up, twisted a dial labelled EMERGENCY. The ship's ULR unit hummed. Root said into the mesh, "Dicantropus station —we're being attacked by natives. Send help at once."

Root sank back into the seat. A tape would repeat his message endlessly until cut off.

Barbara staggered to the seat beside Root. "What were those orange balls?"

"That's what *I've* been wondering—some sort of bomb."

But there were no more of them. And presently the horizon began to glare, the hill became a silhouette on the electric sky. And over their heads the transmitter pulsed an endless message into space.

"How long before we get help?" whispered Barbara.

"Too long," said Root, staring off toward the hill. "They must be afraid of the machinegun—I can't understand what else they're waiting for. Maybe good light."

"They can—" Her voice stopped. She stared. Root stared, held by unbelief—amazement. The hill across the pond was breaking open, crumbling . . .

* * * * *

Root sat drinking brandy with the captain of the supply ship *Method*, which had come to their assistance, and the captain was shaking his head.

"I've seen lots of strange things around this cluster but this masquerade beats everything."

Root said, "It's strange in one way, in another it's as cold and straightforward as ABC. They played it as well as they could and it was pretty darned good. If it hadn't been for that scoundrel Landry they'd have fooled us forever."

The captain banged his glass on the desk, stared at Root. "But *why?*"

Root said slowly, "They liked Dicantropus. It's a hell-hole, a desert to us, but it was heaven to them. They liked the heat, the dryness. But they didn't

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want a lot of off-world creatures prying into their business—as we surely would have if we'd seen through the masquerade. It must have been an awful shock when the first Earth ship set down here."

"And that pyramid . . ."

"Now that's a strange thing. They were good psychologists, these Dicantrops, as good as you could expect an off-world race to be. If you'll read a report of the first landing, you'll find no mention of the pyramid. Why? Because it wasn't here. Landry thought it looked new. He was right. It *was* new. It was a fraud, a decoy—just strange enough to distract our attention.

"As long as that pyramid sat out there, with me focusing all my mental energy on it, they were safe—and how they must have laughed. As soon as Landry broke in and discovered the fraud, then it was all over . . .

"That might have been their miscalculation," mused Root. "Assume that they knew nothing of crime, of antisocial action. If everybody did what he was told to do their privacy was safe forever." Root laughed. "Maybe they didn't know human beings so well after all."

The captain refilled the glasses and they drank in silence. "Wonder where they came from," he said at last.

Root shrugged. "I suppose we'll never know. Some other hot dry planet, that's sure. Maybe they were refugees or some peculiar religious sect or maybe they were a colony."

"Hard to say," agreed the captain sagely. "Different race, different psychology. That's what we run into all the time."

"Thank God they weren't vindictive," said Root, half to himself. "No doubt they could have killed us any one of a dozen ways after I'd sent out that emergency call and they had to leave."

"It all ties in," admitted the captain.

Root sipped the brand, nodded. "Once that ULR signal went out, their isolation was done for. No matter whether we were dead or not, there'd be Earthmen swarming around the station, pushing into their tunnels—and right there went their secret."

And he and the captain silently inspected the hole across the pond where the tremendous space-ship had lain buried under the spine-scrub and rusty black creeper.

"And once that space-ship was laid bare," Root continued, "there'd be a hullabaloo from here to Fomalhaut. A tremendous mass like that? We'd have to know everything—their space-drive, their history, everything about them. If what they wanted was privacy that would be a thing of the past. If they were a colony from another star they had to protect their secrets the same way we protect ours."

BARBARA was standing by the ruins of the station, poking at the tangle with a stick. She turned and Root saw that she held his pipe. It was charred and battered but still recognizable.

She slowly handed it to him.

"Well?" said Root.

She answered in a quiet withdrawn voice: "Now that I'm leaving I think I'll miss Dicantropus." She turned to him; "Jim . . ."

"What?"

"I'd stay on another year if you'd like."

"No," said Root. "I don't like it here myself."

She said, still in the low tone: "Then—you don't forgive me for being foolish . . ."

Root raised his eyebrows. "Certainly I do. I never blamed you in the first place. You're human. Indisputably human."

"Then—why are you acting—like Moses?"

Root shrugged.

"Whether you believe me or not," she said with an averted gaze, "I never—"

He interrupted with a gesture. "What does it matter? Suppose you did—you

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had plenty of reason to. I wouldn't hold it against you."

"You would—in your heart."

Root said nothing.

"I wanted to hurt you. I was slowly going crazy—and you didn't seem to care one way or another. Told—him I wasn't—your property."

Root smiled his sad smile. "I'm human too."

He made a casual gesture toward the hole where the Dicantrop space-ship had lain. "If you still want diamonds go down that hole with a bucket. There's diamonds big as grapefruit. It's an old volcanic neck, it's the grand-daddy of all diamond mines. I've got a claim staked out around it; we'll be using diamonds for billiard balls as soon as we get some machinery out here."

They turned slowly back to the *Method.*

"Three's quite a crowd on Dicantropus," said Root thoughtfully. "On Earth, where there's three billion, we can have a little privacy."

STARTLING ODDITIES

STONE-AGE citizens did not all live in caves. The Coon-Libby expedition in Iran has discovered relics proving that farming was practiced at least 8,000 years ago.

THE solving of ancient crime by modern fingerprint methods may result through the discovery of prints on 3,500-year-old artifacts by Dr. Alan Wace of Alexandria.

AS IF the atom were not already complex enough—Dr. Robert B. Leighton of Caltech has just discovered a fifteenth particle—the anti-proton—in the hydrogen atom.

ROMAN physicians used electric shock treatments to cure headaches, using electric fish to get results, according to Dr. John Fulton of Yale.

THE part of man's brain that does the worrying has been located, also by Dr. Fulton, in recent experiments. It consists of fibrous projections from frontal lobes.

LATEST gambling menace is a threat only to pigeons. Prof. B. F. Skinner of Harvard has discovered they work harder when there is a chance of hitting a jackpot.

INDOOR shooting stars, fireballs and variable stars will be features of the Morehead Planetarium at the University of North Carolina after September first.

NOW they claim the sun is just a super hydrogen bomb. Its energy is derived from the same type of chain reaction, according to Drs. Edward Freeman and Lloyd Motz.

GETTING drunk is a failing of rats as well as humans when problems pile up, as shown by recent experiments at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston.

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Robot XL-3 Wasn't Much Good, but He Served His Purpose!

Murdock expressed surprise that the robot was not snoring

Yes, Sir!

By H. B. FYFE

STOCKY Les Dale peeped out the door of the lab and grunted disgustedly. *"Visitors!"*

Murdock, his co-worker, wrinkled his freckled Roman nose and scowled intently at the report blank he was filling out. He leaned over until his head was almost level with the chest of the sample robot they had been testing, read off the serial number.

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Only after he had written this down, apparently, did Dale's remark penetrate. "*Another* tour?" He groaned.

Les did not smile at the cracked tenor voice. Murdock enjoyed a certain respect among the United Labs technicians.

"Looks like just one big-shot and his crowd. Irma's guiding them."

"Let's go help MacNichols with his voice-boxes," suggested Murdock immediately.

"It'll look bad, Jim. They'll walk in on an empty lab."

"Then maybe we can be testing something that demands absolute silence! Open up this pot and pretend to be listening to his innards! Very grave now—it might be intestinal dandruff!"

Les shook his sleek dark head resignedly but came over. Even in his gunny-sack of a lab coat he contrived to look dapper, a decided contrast to his loose-jointed lanky friend. "It'll take more than that to shut Irma up," he predicted.

"Yeah, but maybe they won't hang around asking asinine questions and watching for me to sit up and bark like a scientist—whatever they think one looks like!"

He unscrewed and opened a double door in the robot's back, revealing an imposing array of connections and switches. As Les obediently laid his ear against the casing of the chest. Murdock began to fiddle with tiny adjustment knobs at the back of the robot's head. The machine hummed and buzzed and its built-in headlight blinked.

THE door swung open, admitting a petite blonde and a large gray-haired man whose ruddy face bore an arrogant expression. Les Dale, from the corner of his eye, estimated the ruddiness as fifty per cent artificial sunlamp and fifty per cent blood pressure. The visitor's very posture indicated that he was used to getting his way.

Several prettily groomed young men with bright looks hovered in the hall, peering over the stout man's broad shoulders.

". . . and in this lab, Mr. Whitehead, the technicians test the robbots for maneuverability and response to commands."

"Looks like one of ours they have," remarked the heavy-set gentleman in uninhibited tones. "That right, Bowman?"

"Yes, sir," answered one of his henchmen, all but snapping to attention. "One of our Series-K models."

Murdock, head cocked as if listening, raised his eyes slowly. He stared through Mr. Whitehead with a distant scowl.

"Not interrupting anything, are we?" demanded the latter jovially.

Murdock shook his head a fraction of an inch and continued to stare. He twisted a knob slightly, causing the humming to rise correspondingly in pitch. Les remained engrossed by faint internal sounds.

"As you see, Mr. Whitehead," Irma interposed after flinging the technical pair a cold look, "United Labs checks scientifically on every detail before certifying a product publicly. The mere fact that your robots bear our seal of approval—"

"Yes, yes," agreed Whitehead in a slightly subdued bellow. "We make a lot of that in advertising, don't we, Larkin?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Whitehead."

"In fact my decision to have our products certified by United Labs has resulted in a definite gain in sales."

"That's right, Mr. Whitehead," agreed Larkin but Les thought he had the look of a man just denied custody of his own brain child.

"Of course, it's just a formality. We know they're okay and I certainly wouldn't pay you to tell me otherwise. But it helps in advertising—right, Bowman?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Whitehead!"

Irma expressed gratification on be-

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half of United Labs. Tactfully attempting to gloss over the silent reception she moved toward the door. The sightseers were soon trouping on to the next laboratory in the robot-certification chain.

Murdock turned off the robot while Les replaced the hatches. He followed his nose over to an intercom and flicked a switch. "Hey, Mac!" he called. "You finished with the voice-box from this Whitehead Mark K eggbeater?"

A discreetly lowered voice replied. "Speak up! What's the matter? That old stuffed shirt get to your place with his pack of performing baboons?"

He listened reflectively a moment, then turned to Les. "How do you like that? He cut me off—they must be there."

Les grinned faintly. "The old man didn't look exactly like a dope to me," he objected. "If he's the boss of Whitehead Robots he probably knows what he wants and how to get it."

Murdock shrugged and switched on the robot's power. "Go into the next room!" he ordered, handing the machine the test data sheet, stamped and annotated by the technicians through hands the sample robot had already passed.

The machine pivoted to its right and strode with some dignity toward the connecting door to the next lab. It fumbled clumsily with the knob but finally got into the next room and shut the door behind itself.

"By the way," asked Les, "what was it made for?"

"House servant. Bargain-price butler or something like that."

"Huh!" grunted Les. "Moves pretty well but I can see it dropping a lot of dishes."

"So can I but it just manages to meet the minimum performance requirements. That Whitehead crowd sure knows how to trim the corners!"

Les yawned. "Let's get some lunch," he suggested. "We've got those Jones and Clark machinist models to check this afternoon—ten samples."

"A snap," said Murdock airily. "They hardly have to move around at all. The built-in tools have already been checked downstairs. We can stretch it out a day or two for an easy loaf."

LATE the following morning, however, this pleasant schedule was interrupted.

Murdock, Les Dale and MacNichols had gathered for a break. The grizzled expert on voice-boxes had finished replacing the speaking mechanisms in the ten specialized robots lined up along one wall of the room. He sat down and offered a pack of cigarettes.

Just as Les reached for one, the door banged open and a shiny new robot strode in. It seemed to be bronze with gold trim. Clinking to a smart halt it proffered its data sheet.

"Another one?" yawned Murdock. "Go to the end of the line!"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Les.

The robot, caught in mid-turn, got its feet crossed, staggered ungracefully.

"He's carrying a pink data sheet," the stocky technician pointed out.

Murdock scowled down his freckled nose. "Rush job, eh? Another one where they want the data yesterday! You're nearest, Mac—see whose it is!"

MacNichols relieved the robot of the offensively colored data sheet and scanned the heading.

"XL-Three, Whitehead Robot Company," he read aloud. "Personal attendant. All locomotion, vocal and manual tests—structure already certified."

The lanky redhead scowled more deeply. "That loud-mouthed stuffed shirt that stuck his nose in here yesterday!" he exclaimed. "One of *his* cheap jobs! A 'personal attendant,' huh? Probably a bargain basement valet."

"Doesn't look so cheap," demurred MacNichols, scanning the specifications. "That bronze sheath is real and so is the gold trim on the face and head. And—my gosh!"

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He peered closely at the robot. "Hold up your left hand!" he ordered.

The robot complied. They stared at the ring it wore, a massive imitation of a college class-ring with a large gleaming stone. Someone had obviously gone to considerable trouble to create an expensive aura about this machine.

"You two do as you like," said MacNichols, rising. "I'll take the voice-box now. Far's I know 'rush' means 'rush.'"

He opened the compartment in the robot's chest, pulled a screwdriver from his pocket, and went to work. Les and Murdock looked at each other and shrugged.

In a few minutes MacNichols had the voice-box out and tucked under his arm. "Shall I leave you the data sheet?" he asked, starting toward the door of his adjoining workshop.

"Never mind," said Les. "We can write down our figures on another sheet and attach it later."

"I could run the tests backward anyway!" snorted Murdock.

They scrutinized the robot indecisively after the door had closed behind MacNichols. Murdock's stare became the more prejudiced every minute. He curled a lip disdainfully.

"I doubt that Whitehead would put out anything even accidentally good," he declared. "Probably fall on its face if it tries to walk ten steps in a straight line for all its fancy outside!"

Les grinned and shook his head in mock reproof. "Walk along that white line on the floor!" he told the robot. He began to make out a response-to-command data sheet.

"Let's see," he muttered as he scribbled. "Balance, front-to-rear and lateral, standing and walking. Accuracy in direction, in obedience. Then we'll have to run dexterity and speed of responses, maybe with obstacles—"

He was interrupted by a ringing crash that jerked him upright. His first confused impression was that something was missing from the room. Then he looked down and saw the bronze robot lying near the head of the line of machinists. It was flat on its beautiful, gold-trimmed face.

Murdock sank back into the chair from which he had half risen. His freckled Roman nose twisted in a sneer. "What did I say?" he demanded. "Not *even* ten steps!"

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed Les. "I hope nothing's damaged that they can blame on us. Help me get it up!"

"Hunk of junk!" growled the redhead. "Probably won't stand alone for more than five minutes."

THEY heaved the robot to its feet. It was surprisingly heavy, which rendered doubtful Murdock's slurs about cheap construction. It immediately took the two extra steps necessary to reach the end of the painted line, then stood still.

"Let's have lunch!" said Murdock, glaring at the machine.

"Do you think we ought to?" asked Les doubtfully.

"*I'm* no robot. I gotta eat. Whitehead can wait till this afternoon." Murdock peeled off his lab coat and put on a jacket. After a moment's hesitation Les followed his example. Murdock perched a disreputable hat on his head and they moved toward the dor.

"Wait a minute," said Les. "I'll give Mac a call."

He retraced his steps and thrust his head through the connecting doorway but MacNichols declined to join them.

They walked into the corridor and shut the door. Before they had taken three steps along the hall, another crash resounded from inside the lab. They looked at each other.

"If that's what it sounds like—" began Les.

"What a lemon!" growled Murdock.

He strode back, thrust his beak through the half-opened doorway, then flung the door wide open and beckoned to Les. The robot was flat on the floor again, this time on its back.

"Remind me to mark the balance un-

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satisfactory," said Murdock. "Come on before I lose my appetite completely!"

An hour later, when they straggled back from lunch, they found the robot undisturbed. Murdock expressed surprise that it was not snoring, but Les reminded him that MacNichols had the voice-box.

"Good!" said Murdock. "Saves me the trouble of asking, 'Why did you fall down, XL-Three?' The darn thing's probably stupid, too!"

They hauled the robot to its feet. Les considered it. "It only fell straight forward or backward," he said. "Maybe the side balance is okay."

"Or maybe those knotheads downstairs passed a structural fault in the legs," said Murdock.

"Mac looked at the data sheet. He would have mentioned anything they found wrong."

Murdock shrugged and let Les have his way. They had the robot stand up straight and then lean over to one side or the other. In every trial it put out a foot and recovered before falling over. They checked at least a dozen times.

"See?" asked Les. "I've known many a time when *you* couldn't stand up that well. What do you want?"

Murdock grudgingly admitted that the machine was satisfactory in that one respect.

They proceeded to put the robot through a series of walking maneuvers, all of which it performed passably. It also lifted a desk without apparent difficulty or strain, which seemed to indicate that there was no structural weakness in the legs.

"I still don't think much of it," Murdock insisted sourly. "Fancy finish on the surface but from Whitehead that means something inside has been skimped."

"What could they skimp? It makes all the standard motions."

"Oh, I'll find something when I open it up. I'm betting on at least two burned-out tubes or a loose connection."

"Well, let's run dexterity tests first," suggested Les.

"Be lucky if it can pick up a book without dropping it," predicted Murdock.

Les marched the machine over to his own desk. He laid out three books, flat and quite close together. "Pick up the middle book," he ordered casually.

The robot reached out its right hand, selected the book requested, lifted it about a foot above the desk without disturbing the other volumes.

Les nodded triumphantly to Murdock. "You see?" he began. "It's—"

The book seemed to slip through the bronze fingers. It bounced on the surface of the desk and fell open. Murdock thrust out his freckled beak like a pugnacious eagle.

"My book of tables!" he squawked. "I've been missing that for a week. *My* books you have to let him mangle!"

Les hurriedly snatched up the book and closed it properly. "Didn't notice," he apologized. "Must have borrowed it."

"Huh!" grunted his friend. "He turned his baleful glare upon the machine. "Pick out the fourth book in the row along the back of the other desk," he directed.

The robot hesitated momentarily, then reached out toward Dale's desk and chose a volume that stood approximately fourth in the row. Murdock snorted.

"Not *there!* I said the *other* desk. *My* desk. Over *there!*"

The robot dropped the book on the floor and clinked across to the other desk.

"Hey!" protested Les. "Whose books are getting mangled now? You can't buy that one anywhere nowadays."

Murdock watched him pick it up tenderly and grinned. "See?" he taunted. "I *told* you it was stupid and you can see for yourself it's clumsy too! Wait till—*hey! No!* Leave *those* alone! They're mine!"

He rushed across the room to rescue his own belongings from the robot's

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blighting touch. "Enough of this!" he declared, scooping up a pile of his books and dumping them on the desk. "I'm going to have a look at his innards."

HE FOUND the cut-off switch on the back of the robot's head, turned it. Then he opened the compartment below the shoulders, cursing when he found that the Whitehead designer had chosen screws requiring use of a socket wrench instead of the screwdriver with which he was armed.

Finally, he got it open while Les scribbled down his comments on what had been done. Murdock removed all the tubes the Whitehead man seemed to have thought ought to be reached, carried them over to a Rube Goldberg to check.

"There's one in there that's going to stay," he remarked. "Far's I can see, they built the chassis around it. What a simple crew they must be at Whitehead!"

Les wandered over but he too failed to see just how the tube in question could be reached by human hands. "Maye they have a robot or a special tool that can get in there for it," he suggested.

"Hah!" yelled Murdock triumphantly. "Two dead ones! They have a nerve, sending around a pot like this and expecting us to certify it satisfactory. Where's that red-ink stamp? I'm going in to Mac's and dance all over that data sheet with it!"

"Calm down," urged Les. "Let's look for a wiring diagram. Maybe they were smart enough to have spares to take over if a tube blew. Maybe that's why it was clumsy at some things."

He dragged Murdock over to the passive machine and they searched the inside of the casing for diagrams. They located the proper one quickly, began to trace it. After a few minutes they were thoroughly befuddled.

Murdock went back and checked the tubes he had already pronounced dead. He stood by his opinion.

"I don't get it," said Les. "Without *those* two how could it operate at all?"

"Couldn't!" Murdock shrugged with simple finality. "All I know is I didn't manhandle them in any way as I got them out. They were dead when I opened him up."

"I'll get some spares from the cabinet," offered Les.

Murdock called off the number to him, but raised a hand when he returned with the replacements. "Let's try the old ones for a minute," he suggested.

They carefully replaced the original set of tubes. Murdock turned the robot on.

"Take three steps forward!" he ordered.

The machine remained impassive.

"It's not working," said Les, noting that the pilot lights in the "eyes" were dark.

Murdock threw up his hands, opened the casing again, and inserted the new tubes. This time, the machine came to life when addressed.

"Funny," muttered the redhead. "I *expected* to find junk inside—I even said so, remember? But I don't quite see how it ran at all!"

He strode over to his desk phone and called the director of the robot-certification group. "Say, Stephens, what's this fancy Whitehead rush job?" he demanded.

Listening over his shoulder Les gathered that Mr. Whitehead was taking a personal interest in this experimental model, that he claimed the design was based upon his years of experience as an executive and — above all — that Stephens knew better than to contradict Mr. Whitehead even if *some* jackasses in lab coats did not.

"But it's a heap of junk!" protested Murdock irately. "And half-witted besides!"

That, he was informed, was unlikely, considering the unusually expensive construction. Anyway it was beside the point. His job was to pass upon the fitness of the machine or else to dis-

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cover exactly why it did not function. There was no getting around as simple a definition of terms as that.

Murdock flung down the phone. After ten minutes Les got him sufficiently calmed down to heed a suggestion that they re-run all their tests, with the new tubes now in place.

THE trouble was, as they soon found and as Murdock pointed out emphatically, that the robot's performance did not change with the tubes. Worse—despite this fact the technicians were unable to check some of the mistakes. XL-Three remained inept but erratically, so, as if it were a characteristic that could appear in various ways at random. Murdock's features gradually approached the color of his hair.

The robot almost seemed to sense his mood as if human. The worse Murdock expected, the worse he found. "For gossakes!" exploded Les at last. "Stop looking for more trouble! Every single time today you tried to find something wrong it went *all* the way wrong!"

"Yeah," scowled Murdock. "Wish I knew how much is the old tech instinct and how much is Whitehead sloppiness."

"Proves the old saying anyhow—'expect the worst and you won't be disappointed.'"

"Here comes Mac," sighed Murdock as the connecting door was kicked open. "Let's put it up to him."

They joined MacNichols beside the robot, drowning him in their lamentations while he replaced the voice-box. Once or twice he opened his mouth but was unable to break in.

The well ran dry about the time MacNichols drove the last screw. He scratched his grizzled head and looked at them.

"You mean you hit practically every guess straight on the head?" he asked Murdock. "Whenever you smelled something faulty, you found it?"

"I was right every time!" declared Murdock.

"Hmmm," murmured MacNichols.

He dropped the test data sheet on Les Dale's desk and began to toy idly with the latter's approval stamp.

"Queer vocal system it has," he mused. "It can make two or three variations, but in effect it always says the same thing."

"Hah!" exulted Murdock. "Cheap work there, too!"

"I don't think so," said MacNichols. "I think it was designed that way."

He inked the rubber stamp and pressed it down on their section of the data sheet with a firm, unhurried motion. *"Hey!"* they protested simultaneously.

"Why not?" queried MacNichols. "It serves its purpose. Ask it something and listen to the answer!"

He turned on the vocal switch, so that the robot was now functioning fully.

"What kind of numbskull built *you?*" demanded Murdock with a sneer.

"Not that kind of question," interrupted MacNichols patiently. "Something calling for a yes-or-no answer from a—uh—personal attendant."

Murdock turned to the robot again with exaggerated politeness. "You're a complete hunk of junk that can't even stand up, aren't you?" he inquired.

For the first time, the robot was equipped to answer back. "Yes, *sir*, Mr. Whitehead!" it agreed emphatically—and promptly fell flat on its face with a jingling crash.

Les scampered nimbly out of the way but Murdock did not quite make it. He swore and hopped about, rubbing a grazed shin.

MacNichols grinned at him. "You and Whitehead!" he chuckled. "You're never, never wrong, are you?"

"Absolutely right, Mr. Whitehead, sir!" answered a muffled voice from the floor.

Next Issue: THE GAMBLERS, a Novelet by Mack Reynolds and Fredric Brown

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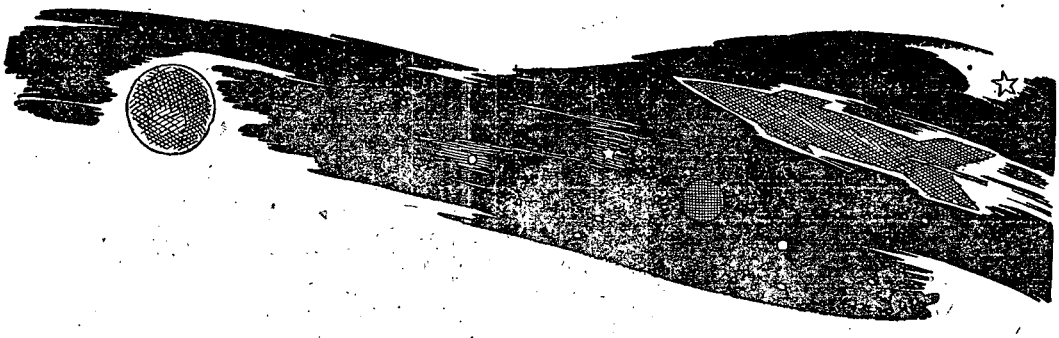

THIS WAY TO MARS

a novelet by

William Campbell Gault

I

HE WAS a very ordinary young man. And the prospects of his ever being anything more than that, except perhaps an ordinary older man, were remote this fine spring morning.

It was May in a year that doesn't matter, in a city that needn't be named, in a country formerly called the United States. His name was John Galveston Hughes and he rose early this fine May morning and, after touching his toes without bending his knees twelve times, he took off his pyjamas and stepped into the filo-chrome shower stall.

He showered twice a day for some reason and wore clothes designed to kill and wasn't a bad looking lad at all. But he'd never had a girl. Not even in high school. Not even in college, where he'd majored in track and once taken fourth in a state meet in the 220. There were five in the race.

In the shower stall, he pressed the first of a row of buttons and a liquid detergent swirled around his firm body from the hundreds of jets that filigreed the walls. The pressure and the pulsating swirl of the streams were more than cleansing. They were invigorating and at the same time strangely quieting.

The second button brought the liquid rinse, faintly perfumed—the third button the drying and massaging streams of air. He came out smelling like roses and feeling like a man who could take third in the 220.

He examined his face in one of the mirrored walls of the bathroom and decided he looked about as good as the next guy—brown hair, blue eyes, a certain patrican cast to the thin face. Why didn't he have a girl?

His father had had a girl and so had his grandfather or of course there would not be any Johnny Hughes. But they'd lived in a time when men were given the doubtful privilege of pursuit and if they wanted a girl, well, they just went after her.

While he dressed John considered this ancient situation and wondered a little about the girls nobody had gone

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John Galveston Hughes, male typist in a woman-run world, upsets an interplanetary conspiracy when he plans a Martian trip

after. They must have been in a position akin to his and what had *they* done about it? According to the sketchy history he'd managed to pick up between track meets they'd written to Dorothy Dix.

She'd been a sort of distaff Tommy Trump as far as he could tell but had *college* girls written to her? He was a college man and it seemed beneath him to write to Tommy Trump.

In his brown-and-gold kitchen at the

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scarlet breakfast bar he said, "Eggs, toast, coffee and maybe some of that orange marmalade.

The Dispensall clicked and whirred and chucked and murmured and then slid the order out its smooth brown chute to the scarlet table. Minus the orange marmalade.

John frowned at the Dispensall and its horrible, metallic voice said, "You said 'maybe.' Don't I work hard enough without doing your thinking for you too?"

"Marmalade," John said meekly. He wasn't a man who enjoyed talking to machines, even the bright machines, but who else was there in his brown and gold kitchen?

So, as the marmalade came out in its crystal dish, he said, "Do you ever—I mean—have you no romantic . . . Do machines ever have female machines?"

"Not at this level."

"Then you wouldn't know about girls—about females."

"Sorry, I don't. You can take the pause out of that too if you want. All I do is serve humanity, as they say."

"And very well too," John said pleasantly and snapped the switch that made the machine dormant. It gave him a sense of power, this mastery over machines. He ate his eggs and toast and some of the marmalade and snapped on the visi-news to enjoy with his coffee.

Jane Baltenkorn's clear alto voice emerged from the speaker behind the screen and then her image came into focus. She wasn't the best looking girl in the world by a damned sight but even she looked good to John's hungry eyes.

She was saying, ". . . an eventuality, of course, which would give Russia dominance over the bridge-playing world, a threat to the traditions and ethics of this most honorable and ancient game. The strategy of our *supposed* friends in this ridiculous manoeuvre seems to be—"

John snapped off the visi-news irritably. The Russians, the Russians, always the Russians. If it hadn't been for them and their threats in the dim and distant eighties there would be no female dominance today and a guy could chase a girl.

It was the Swedes who had started *No, No, Week* back in the eighties, the Swedish women. *I didn't raise my boy friend to be a soldier* was their slogan, and it had spread. To Russia and America, to China and Japan, around the world. *No soldier tastes my lips, no uniformed man shares my bed, no militarist holds me close.* . . . And so on. Because the Russians were talking tough again.

The boys were getting ready for another big one, the drums drumming and the banners flying, and they thought it was a gag. Cute and with logic, but a gag. Until the *No, no—no more* hit them individually and personally where they lived.

In Russia the things shouldn't have taken hold because Nilenoff had a very simple solution. Any Russian male who refused to report for immediate military duty was to die slowly and horribly.

He thought that was bad. Measured against the eternal *No* it was like living in heaven or America. A few died slowly and horribly, a few reported but were rejected because of psychiatric unbalance. Nilenoff didn't want *that* kind of army even on the push buttons.

He raved about capitalistic decay spreading to his beloved country, about needing more living space than a crummy one sixth of the Earth's surface, about female fascism. He was talking to himself. A greater terror loomed.

No!

There was no war. And the women grew drunk with their new power and—and now John Hughes, young and personable, had to talk across the breakfast bar to his Dispensall.

A machine can work harder than a man and think better and faster. A machine is not belligerent or subject to ego inflation and can do almost everything a man can. Almost. Practically anything a man can do a woman can do better.

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Oh, they'd done it. Freed from the emotional and financial drain of war they'd shot rockets to the moon—with mixed crews—established enough universities to accommodate every eligible woman in the country, eliminated the state governments and the county governments and the city governments. They'd followed the classic tradition of the *best* government being the *least* government and run the country on a fraction of what it had formerly cost.

And now they were shooting for Mars.

John knew about that, working in the Department of Science. He was a very small cog in that gargantuan organization but he knew all the other small cogs and they had discussions in the washroom.

It was getting no publicity, rated top-top secret. But the boys who walloped the typewriters in the Department got a word here and a formula there and in the washroom the picture began to take shape in their minds.

Mars was uninhabited—that much had been established. Under the big eye of the recently installed electronic telescope on Mt. Wilson, Mars was practically next door. And Mars was inhabitable.

IN SECTION 37, which had formerly been New Mexico, near Taos, the big ship was taking form. In the Department of Science, the personnel cards were run through the compto-determina scanner, grading for colonists.

It was to be an American colony. Colony, colony, colony . . . John was trying on his new hat before the blue mirror in the entrance hall when this senseless repetition hit him. Colony meant colonists and colonists meant both men *and* women, one for one, each for each other. Hardy duos, hand in hand, going forth to settle a new world. The imagery pleased him and he saw himself in the front row of marching colonists, a lovely by his side.

That would be *something*, a woman for each man and real people too.

Beware of Women!

SCIENCE fiction being the basically speculative thing it is, the idea of a reversal of the sexes has been written about many times. Ascendant female—subordinate male—this theme has been unveiled on perhaps half of the planets that may some day be discovered in the Milky Way.

The treatments have been varied, of course—ranging from the crudest of slapstick to would-be Greek tragedy. Seldom, however, have the characters involved seemed quite human or credible away from the make-believe situation in which their authors involve them.

Which is, in reverse English, our reason for publishing this story. Johnny and Joe and Pete and June and Miss Glutz—especially Miss Glutz—are almost too human and credible to be shrugged off as stf characters. We hope you like them too. —THE EDITOR.

There'd be no artificial insemination in that gang. And maybe, away from the female preponderance of the mother planet, maybe man would again be dominant. Maybe they could stage a *No, No Week* of their own. Or month, even. Well, two weeks . . .

He went out into the May sunshine, dreaming his dreams.

On Eighth, just as he was going down to the belt, a woman smiled at him. A stout woman, about forty-nine, with a mustache. John kept his eyes averted.

The belt to the Science Building was fairly crowded this morning, and John stood next to Pete Haskell. It was a slow-moving belt. "That Brooklyn looks like the club," Pete said. "They've got the pitching."

"I guess," John said and looked around him to see who was within earshot. Then, "What's new in New Mexico."

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Pete looked around too before wering. He was only a file clerk and it gave him a sense of importance to look around. "Another week," he muttered. "Maybe two."

"Oh," John said dispiritedly. "Then the colonists are—"

"Picked?" Pete shook his head. "Damn scanner broke down. Machines! They never work when you want them to."

The mechanical filing clerk was gaining so much headway that lads like Pete were almost obsolete—hence his bitterness.

John said quietly, "On Mars a man could be a man again. A man could be on top."

"Hey," Pete said, staring at him. "Hey, what are you thinking of, John? Hey—" His eyes were suddenly thoughtful.

"Women," John said. "What are you thinking of, Pete?"

Pete continued to stare at him. "John," he said after a few seconds. "Say, could we—would we . . .?"

"Would we what?"

"Don't pretend it isn't your idea. What else could you be thinking?"

"I was thinking of volunteering for the Mars trip."

Pete snorted. "Volunteering! Since when does anybody volunteer for anything? You know the compto-determina scanner decides all that. But, John, it's a *machine*."

"And?"

"And Joe Nolan runs it. And Joe's as hungry as we are. He's virtually a virgin."

It sounded like a song, John thought. Nolan, Joe, virgin, virtual. "We're dreaming," John said. "You know we're dreaming, Pete."

"Are we? What can we lose?"

"Our freedom, about twenty years of our lives. Extra-terrestrial Planning doesn't fool with meddlers, Pete. They'd really stick it to us. And the whole Science Department behind them."

"Chicken," Pete said scornfully. "Count you out, is that it, Johnny?"

John frowned. "You're serious? You're really going to approach Joe Nolan on it?"

"I sure as hell am. In or out, John?" His voice was grave.

John looked at him for only a second before saying, "*In!*"

They stepped off the belt at the first escalator in the Science zone and went up together. They held their thumbprints in front of the time-clock scanner and watched their punched cards move over to the *In* display case. They were still twelve minutes early.

In the mammoth lounge next to the washroom Joe Nolan was watching a re-broadcast of yesterday's Cubs game. He was alone in front of that particular screen.

Pete said, "I hear your baby broke down, Joe. How bad is it?"

"The color disc," Joe said. "Every grade of physical condition has a different color, you know, and every degree of intelligence and every point of social aptitude. Blended they give the kind of color the scanner eye picks up. Well, right now, the eye's color-blind."

"And what have they got you doing now?"

Joe glanced at him curiously. "Fixing it. You think I'm a stooge like you monkeys? I am also a mechanic."

"I'll bet," John said. "I'll bet you'll fix it but good!"

"Take back your needle, Johnny. I can make that thing whistle *Dixie* if I want to. I can fix it to play third base for the Yanks."

"Huh," Pete said. "Listen to the man talk."

Joe was getting a little red. "Now, listen, boys, I know you're just needling me but on this I'm sensitive. I tell you honestly I can make that damned compto-determina scanner do anything I want it to with personnel cards."

Both of them stared at Joe gravely. Very seriously Pete said, "*Anything*, Joe?"

His stare went from one to the other. "What gives? What's the gimmick?"

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Pete smiled. John smiled and said, "How's your girl, Joe?"

"Girl, girl, you guys know I haven't got a—" He stopped talking, his mouth still open. He looked at John and at Pete and back at John. "Girl, girl—" he said hoarsely, and closed his mouth.

III

NOBODY said anything for almost a full minute. Behind Joe there was a crack of the bat and Sam DiMaggio went streaking for first. Finally, Joe said, "Twenty years."

"With good lawyers twenty years," John said quietly. "The question is—how badly do we want it? How much will we risk?"

Joe didn't answer that. Instead he said, "Wouldn't it look strange, three men from Science, including the operator?"

"Strange as hell to a man," John said. "But to a woman? They've learned to rely on machines completely. How many of them could drive a car with a steering wheel or crack an egg by hand?"

The warning buzzer and the red lights were flashing—two minutes to get on the job. All the video screens went blank, the bubblers dried up, the lounge chairs disappeared into the floor cavities. Women knew how to make a washroom or lounge uninhabitable.

Pete took that moment to say, "And maybe, Joe, on Mars—a new deal. Give it some thought." He took a deep breath and put a hand on John's shoulder. "We'll call it 'Operation John.' "

The marching song came from the cove-masked speakers—*On Wisconsin* this morning, the school from the state that was now section 22. Heads erect and falsely proud they marched to their appointed tasks. Good old University of 22, what a team they'd had last fall!

Operation John—through the long dull day the phrase lived with him, moving back and forth through his mind. Operation John—if Joe came through...

At two-thirty Don Devlin stopped at his desk. "Boss wants to see you, John. Looks hot."

Don meant angry. And she certainly did. She sat back of her huge ebony desk in her mammoth red durapelt-covered chair, a gigantic slob of a woman with unkempt hair and a ridiculous cigarette holder dangling from unpainted lips.

She had a sheaf of letters in her hand, John's morning production, ready for her signature. She waved them, and said, "What is it, spring, love, baseball? Migawd, what in hell is it?"

"Something's wrong?" John asked meekly.

"Erasures," she said. "What do you erase with, a piece of coal? A few clean corrections to every, say—oh, six letters. But my gosh, Johnny, this just isn't like you."

He stared down at the carpet. She put the cigarette holder carefully on the desk and leaned forward in her chair. The desk creaked under the weight of her bosom as she said quietly, "Love? Has that old devil love come to my favorite typist?" Her sagging face was repulsive in simpering whimsey. "Love, Johnny—at last?"

He shook his head sadly. He looked up in time to catch the gleam of satisfaction in her eyes. "I'm glad," she said softly. "I—wouldn't want to lose my little Johnny. Today's one of our bad days, isn't it?"

He nodded mutely. Why was it always the crows—the hags and the slobs and the washed-out widows? Was he like Liederkranz, needing a cultivated taste?

"You're a good boy," she said. "I'm sorry I blew up. Take the rest of the afternoon off. Maybe you can catch the tail end of that ball game. Come back refreshed tomorrow, Johnny."

"Thanks," he said. "You're—aces, Mrs. Glutz. It won't happen again."

"Of course not," she said, smiling horribly. "Fresh and bright tomorrow, Johnny-boy." She was practically drooling on her desk.

He went out, nausea stirring in him.

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He went over to Filing after picking up his hat and stood in the doorway, looking for Pete. Pete with an armful of papers and a worried look was standing near the transparent east wall. He saw John and hurried over. "Trouble? What is it?"

John shrugged. "Got the rest of the day off. How about tonight, meeting some place with Joe? Sort of make some sensible plans."

"Sure. I'll call you. Hey, how about that, the rest of the day off? That Glutz will eat you some day, John."

"That's my speed," John said. "*Glutz!* Well, there are better worlds."

"Quiet," Pete cautioned. "Easy, boy. I'll call you."

John went out on the street side and the day was still magic. Ball game, she'd said. There were no male clubs playing in town and he sure didn't want to watch the Senators play Philadelphia.

WHAT didn't they have, he and Pete and Joe and all the others? What was it they lacked? With all the women in the world why should a few men be stormed and so many overlooked? In the old days had it been the meal ticket they'd been looking for with all their talk of romance? Why, when they didn't need men for support, had they become so self-sufficient? Was there *no* romance in them?

Some there must be, he thought, as he walked past the soap opera house. But damn it, it was all talk, words, blather. And if it was did he still want one all to himself on Mars?

Yes.

I'll make it romantic, he vowed. *It may have to be a new high in self-delusion but I'll make it romantic as hell.*

He turned on Ames, heading for Lydia Pinkham park. Near Taos the ship would be waiting, and how appropriate that was for the launching of Operation John. Taos, which had formerly housed D. H. Lawrence and Walt MacFredric and what lovers *they* had been! Taos, which had erected a black marble statue to *man's* best friend—the dog!

Oh, it was a big scheme and how big were they, he and Pete and Joe? A typist, a filing clerk and a compto-determina operator—how big were they? A man can be as big as his dream, given the guts to try it. And what could they lose but their loneliness?

Would they get to Mars? They would. Women had reduced adventure to another word in the dictionary. There was exactly as much chance of their missing a safe landing on Mars as there was of John being elected president of his local bridge club. If Mars weren't a certainty, there'd be no money wasted on the ship now being finished. That was a mortal lock, getting to Mars.

And once there, wouldn't other ships follow, bringing the indiscriminate choice of the undirected compto-determina? Wouldn't that change the picture back to this one?

They'd have to discuss that tonight.

In Pinkham Park he sat on a white leather-upholstered bench, watching the female androids pushing the baby carriages. One of those he could have, just by registering at the Center. Some of the boys had settled for them and seemed happy.

Well, some of the boys were watching the Senators play Philadelphia this afternoon too. It depended on the degree of your degradation. For pushing baby carriages, for keeping a house running right, sure. But for marriage, for romance? John shook his head.

One of the androids said, "Who's asking you?" and went by, her nose tilted skyward. Women, women, even these—pseudo-women. Why did he want one? It was a question better minds than his had failed to solve.

They met, he and Pete and Joe, in the Lace Room at the Cryden Arms that evening. A fancy spot, but this was a momentous occasion. Joe said, "She'll be ready to roll tomorrow afternoon. The thing is, what kind of partners do you want?"

"Call them wives," Pete said, "because

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that's what they'll be. We'll be married on board the ship. Now here's what I want . . ."

He went into a long and detailed description, mostly physical.

And while Pete talked, John thought and thought and thought and all he could think of was the video star, June Maling.

That was really reaching. Pert and popular and gifted, she'd resent being sent out as a colonist. She'd go, of course, because women had a national loyalty as great as man's. But what kind of life would that be for her? Married to John Hughes, the no-girl man, leaving an adoring fandom behind. What kind of . . .?

Joe said, "And you, John?"

"June Maling," John said. "I'll buy a drink."

They both stared at him. Joe said, "I'll say you'll buy a drink. Holy cow, you don't want much, do you?"

"Just June," John said. "I've wanted her since I was eighteen."

"Well," Joe said finally, "considering the risk we're taking I guess it isn't too much to ask. I won't need the machine for that. I'll just get her card direct from personnel."

The tumblers came out then and the weight-lifting act. Pete said, "I understand there was a time when they had women in night club acts, women in tights."

"Tights?" Joe said. "That's going way back. Naked, they had them, even when your grandpa was a boy. And some of them were beauties, I've read."

The weight-lifter was last year's Mr. America and every feminine eye in the house was on him. Behind him the tumblers cavorted, lithe and agile lads clad only in loin cloths.

"Double bourbon for me," Joe said and the others followed his lead.

John said, "How about the ships that follow us, boys? If we want to set up the new, or rather the *old*, regime on Mars, won't the ones who follow rebel at that?"

JOE shook his head. "I've set the machine for a definite mental pattern, male and female, and that's the way it will continue to operate. Actually your Miss June Maling will be the only female outside the pattern. And, I think, a possible source of trouble, John."

"Maybe she won't want to go," Pete said. "Maybe she'll back out."

"For that," John said, "*you'll* buy one, Pete."

There were more after that. There were too many. John didn't remember getting home but he got there. And awoke, fully clothed, on the davenport in the living room the next morning.

He went into the shower a very sad sack and even the rosy rinse failed to lift him from his sodden lethargy. No headache, no buzzing in the ears—just the dull listlessness of a sapped vitality.

June Maling, June Maling, June Maling . . . His girl, June Maling. That was a laugh. He must have been loaded last night to reach for that one. June Maling—how she'd scream when she learned she'd been paired with a typist for the rest of her life.

To the Dispensall he said, "Onion soup and toast, thin toast."

The murmuring and whirring, the clicking while the audio-selector relayed the news down the line.

The onion soup helped some and then he had a cup of black coffee and then he turned on Jane Baltenkorn and she wasn't talking about the Russians this morning.

She was talking about June Maling and Glenn Jalkowski. All-American Glenn Jalkowski, who had run wild against Army, Michigan and Southern California and was now walking tamely at the side of June Maling. Glenn was Miss Baltenkorn's guest this morning.

He was a handsome lad and modest. He looked gravely at John from the screen of the visi-news. Baltenkorn simpered, "I understand you're an all-around athlete, Glenn, though football seems to give you the most publicity."

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He smiled modestly. "Oh, I've won a few track meets. I only hold three world records in track, though, the 220, the 440 and the 880. I'm not really what you'd call a track man."

John, who had taken that fourth in the state meet, had always considered *himself* a track man. He looked at his coffee cup.

"And now, cupid tells us," Baltenkorn went on, "that you've quit running. What are these rumors about June Maling, Glenn?"

"We get along," he said. "Isn't she beautiful, Miss Baltenkorn?" He gave John his profile, as he looked at the commentator, waiting for the WORD on that.

"She certainly is," Jane agreed, "and talented and thoroughly charming. But then, so are you, Glenn."

"Aw, he said, "I play the uke a little but I'm not really talented. When I think—"

John never did learn what the All-American thought. He snapped off the visi-news and stared at the table. Glenn Jalkowski and June Maling, headline makers. And John Galveston Hughes, manual and voice typist. A triangle? *Huh!* Huh, huh *and* huh!

He stared at his coffee cup and saw June Maling. He saw her with Glenn, making the rounds, soaking up the adulation, two bright and talented stars in love and well paired.

Joe had said the machine wouldn't be ready to roll until this afternoon. He'd see him at the lunch hour and tell him to forget about June Maling.

It was raining. Somebody at the Weather Bureau had pulled a boner and it was raining at the peak of the morning inbound traffic. Or perhaps Dame Nature had decided to exercise one of her rare opportunities for decision.

Pete wasn't on the belt this morning and John realized that most of the riders weren't the old familiar faces. He was late. And after his typing errors of yesterday, after the unprecedented gift of an afternoon off, old Glutz was not likely to view his tardiness with benevolence.

To hell with Glutz! To hell with Baltenkorn, Jalkowski and June Maling! To hell with the dreams of John Galveston Hughes!

His thumbprint in front of the time clock scanner not only shifted his card this morning, it also lighted the red bulb next to his name in the display case. This, he knew, actuated the buzzer in Glutz's office.

A note was waiting for him when he got to his desk:

See me immediately.

M.G.

III

THE cigarette holder wasn't in her mouth when he walked into her office but she was as repulsive as ever. She shook her head and looked at him.

"I'm sorry," John said. "I really haven't any excuse either."

She smiled. It would have been better if she hadn't. She said, "Johnny, Johnny," and shook her head. "You know we can't have any waste here. You'll have to make it up, Johnny." And now she leaned forward. "Maybe—tonight?"

Like some monstrous buffalo spider eyeing a fly she watched him, hunched forward as though ready to hurtle her grotesque body toward him. John shook his head stubbornly. "Not tonight."

Her voice quietly ominous. "And *why* not?"

"I'm—just not in the mood to—work tonight."

"Mood?" She leaned back, studying him, her chin tilted. "Mood? What are you—saying? What are you suggesting, Johnny?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm simply stating that I won't work tonight—or any night."

"Stating?" She seemed to turn to rock. "Stating? What kind of a word is that. It comes very close to insubordination, Johnny."

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"Does it? he said and returned her gaze equally.

"Why, Johnny!" she said, bewilderment now on her face along with the anger. "You're—well, aren't you?"

"Not quite," he said. "I've got a bellyache, a bellyfull of science, of ball games and fights and warm showers. I don't care what happens anymore."

"Love," she said finally. "It could only be love. Who's turned you down, Johnny? Did it hurt much?"

"It's not love," he half-lied. "I'm fed up with this world. It's a woman's world and I'm fed up with it."

"A woman's world? Look at me, Johnny. Have I got everything I want? Am I contented?"

"You've got a good job," Johnny said. "You've got a husband and a home to go to, a real home, and you don't punch any clocks. I'll trade jobs with you any time."

She turned to rock again. "I'm sure you would. At some loss, I'm sure you'll admit, to the efficiency of the Department."

"With no loss," Johnny said.

It was quiet, very quiet. "That," she said finally, "was a remark in poor taste and bad sense. You *do* have to work here, Johnny, and it *is* silly of you to make your conditions of work any—"

"I don't have to work anywhere," Johnny said. "And especially here." He turned and walked out.

He went to his desk, and was cleaning it out when he remembered Joe and the machine. He picked up his hat and went over to Extra-terrestrial Planning. The huge compto-determina machine was running!

From his control rostrum Joe waved at him. John went over there quickly. "I thought you said this afternoon, Joe. You haven't . . ."

Joe winked at him. "Outbound's already got most of the cards. I'm just finishing up. And what a gang we're going to have!"

"But, Joe—you said . . ."

"I got here early this morning and got her all set. I couldn't sleep anyway and as long as we'd decided—"

"But, Joe, I've changed my mind."

Joe closed his eyes. When he opened them he said, "Pivot L-head camshaft, what in hell do you mean, you changed your mind, assuming you've got a mind, which I don't. Are you crazy? Just whom did you have in that alleged mind now? *Glutz?*"

"Nobody. But especially not June Maling. She's in love with Jalkowski."

"What's that, a cult?" Joe was a baseball fan.

"It's a man. A handsome, modest and talented football player. He's a big, big wheel."

"So? And you feel for him or is he one of your gods? If he's such a hotshot he ought to be a good loser."

"He won't be any kind of a loser," Johnny said. "You think she'll go to Mars with a lousy typist? You think she won't have every big shot in the country on Science's neck? And how about her fans?"

The compto-determina stopped suddenly and the room was as quiet as a morgue. Joe said, "You couldn't have thought of all this last night? It would be too much to expect, I suppose, that you would think of your friends in a situation like this. If she does stir up a rumpus, and they start to investigate this . . ."

Joe came down off the rostrum. "You'd better get to hell out of here. That's all we need, being seen together. That's all we need to make the sentence thirty years instead of twenty."

"But . . ." John said.

"Go," Joe said. "Get *out!* I'll call you—maybe."

JOHN went out. The rain had stopped, but it was not a pleasant day, damp and chill. The possibility of the twenty years in stir bothered him very little at the moment though he regretted bringing Pete and Joe into it.

Even if the rumpus *should* touch off a Science investigation, what could they

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prove? And maybe, with the patriotic angle involved, June Maling would hesitate to protest too publicly. But that didn't make him feel any better. The picture of Glenn Jalkowski, All-American back was still with him.

June Maling—the Mars trip was a sleeper jump compared to the distance between John Hughes and June Maling. How had he ever been crazy enough, sober, to suggest that name to Joe?

In his apartment he stretched out on the davenport, and stared at the ceiling. He saw her in *Brent's Folly*, in *Venusian Lace* and all the others. Her tightly curled black hair, her expressive eyes, her grace, her trim figure, her rich warming voice. June, June, June . . .

He slept.

In his sleep he turned and fidgeted, dreaming of June. He saw Jalkowski take a hand-off from Smith and cut inside tackle, knees high and moving, moving, moving like the wind, the Army tacklers looking silly as he outsped, outguessed, outmanoeuvered them all the way to pay dirt. He saw June moving upstage and taking the single rose from the vase on the mantel. He saw her turn and heard again her final speech in *Unwanted.*

Unwanted by whom? Who didn't want June Maling? What male wouldn't give up his right arm or his Rose Bowl tickets for a lifetime with June Maling?

Chimes. The chimes in *New Ground?* No, the chimes in the apartment of John Hughes. He rose to a dim room. He must have slept for hours—it was dusk.

He went to the door and a man stood there, a handsome man and tall, a dead-serious man named Glenn Jalkowski.

"John Hughes?" the man asked.

John nodded. "And you're Glenn Jalkowski. I saw you against Army. You sure had the blocking in that one."

"I didn't come here to talk football," Jalkowski said.

"What else do you know?" John asked him.

"I know when there's funny business going on," Jalkowski said. "I've got a friend in the Science Department. I've got friends all over, Hughes."

"Come in," John said. "What are you trying to tell me?"

Jalkowski came in and swung the door shut behind him. "I'm telling you I've heard about the Mars business and that Miss Maling's been picked to go and you're to be her husband."

"You heard about the Mars business—from one of the employees?" John's voice was grave, his glance steady on Jalkowski's. "Somebody talked?"

"That's right. The official announcement won't come until tomorrow but I heard and I got your address from this same party."

"It's something you shouldn't admit," John said quietly. "This friend of yours can get life for that."

"Save the bull," Jalkowski said. "How about you and your buddies rigging that passenger list? What could you get for that?"

"Nobody rigged anything," John said. "I don't even know Miss Maling. Do you by any chance, mean the video star?"

"Save it," Jalkowski told him. "Just this I want to tell you. Whoever rigged that list I want it unrigged before the announcement. Or you'll be a very sad looking sight. Got that?"

"I got it. And now let me tell you something. The Secretary of Science herself has already got that list and there isn't a damned thing I can do about it. And there isn't anything I *would* do about it if I could. And if Miss Maling wants to back out all she has to do is say so. Going to Mars is a privilege, not a duty."

"Why, you little—!" Jalkowski began and reached one big hand out for John's shoulder.

John caught him with a left hand, a fine left hand flush to the halfback's mouth. Exultation flowed in John as blood flowed from the mouth and he started a right for the same spot.

Somebody pulled the floor out from under him and then hit him with the roof.

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The bell and he came out for the fourth round, circling away from Jalkowski's right, watching the pattern of his feet, waiting for him to get flat-footed. From the gallery a fan shouted, "Kill the big jerk, Johnny. Left-hand him silly."

The bell and he opened his eyes and heard the bell again through the throbbing in his head. His doorbell.

HE PUT a hand beneath him, and winced at the rattles in his brain. He rose slowly, and opened the door. Pete Haskell stood there and Joe Nolan. They looked troubled. "What'n'hell happened to you?" Pete said.

"Slipped in the shower," John said. "Come in, boys."

They came in. Joe looked around the apartment. "Alone?"

"Don't flatter me. Of course. Why? What's new?"

"Trouble," Joe said. "Tell him, Pete."

"Glutz," Pete said.

John massaged the back of his neck and ran his tongue along the inside of his teeth. They were all there. He moved carefully into the living room and they followed. He sat in one of the big chairs—they sat on the davenport.

"Start at the beginning," John said, "and make it simple."

"Glutz got a copy of the passenger list," Pete told him, "and when she came to your name she was wild. She said you'd quit your job this afternoon and you wouldn't have quit if you didn't know you'd be on the list. She said you've been acting love-sick and now she can see why, and how about Joe here, the operator, being on the list? She's screaming collusion."

"And I," Joe added, "have just had a very bad two hours with the Secretary herself."

John rubbed his jaw and twisted his neck slowly. "What can they prove?"

"Nothing," Joe said, "unless they put us under lucidate and they need our permission for that unless it's a case of suspected treason."

"Well then," John said, "what's all the fuss about?

"Because," Joe said quietly, "it could be a case of suspected treason."

John stared at him and the rattles grew in his brain.

"Naming no names," Joe went on, "if you'll pardon the State terminology, a rigged machine could be used to send the wrong people to Mars. Naming no names again, a party of supposed Americans could be sent and then, too late, it might be discovered they were nationals of the no-name country."

"Spies?" John said. "Why that's—"

"A rumour currently running its course in State," Pete said, "*and* Science. I've no idea where it started."

"Jalkowski," John said.

"Come again?" Pete said.

"June Maling's boy-friend," John explained. "He said he had a friend in Science. I'll bet . . ." He rubbed his eyes. "But the whole idea is ridiculous. Why wouldn't this no-name country build their own ship?"

"Because they haven't the know-how. They talk big and loud but they're scientific midgets. They haven't a single advanced machine they haven't copied from somewhere."

John waggled his jaw and shrugged his shoulder muscles loose. "Well, what do we do?"

"We stand together," Pete said, "or hang together. Tentatively the list stands until there's a quiet investigation of all the names. The coincidence of the three of us can be explained because a lot of the cards were from Science anyway, as the Personnel Survey showed a lot of us were expendable. And the machine had been set for that as one of the factors. But we need a solid front, John, and you're the weakest spot in that."

"Well, thanks," John said bitterly.

"I'm not being nasty," Joe said, "but when Pete and I were satisfied with ordinary girls you had to reach for Pluto. You had to have June Maling."

"Didn't I come to you this morning and ask you to change that? Can I help

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it if you have to be an eager beaver and get to work early? Throw out June Maling—tell the Secretary to throw her out if you want. And my name too. You can all go to hell."

"Sure we can," Pete said. "And we will if you don't simmer down. If you'd cut out the childish emotionalism I'd breath easier. All we have to do is sit tight and act right—all *three* of us."

"Okay," John said. "I'm sorry. It wasn't the shower that got me it was Glenn Jalkowski. He really slugged me, the ape."

"Jalkowski?" Pete said. "How did he hear about the list?"

"He's got a friend in Science, he claimed."

"But—" Pete began and then the screen at the end of the living room lighted up and the face of an operator came into view.

"John Hughes. Hollywood calling John Hughes."

John looked at Pete and Joe wonderingly and went over to stand in front of the screen. He snapped a switch and said, "John Hughes."

The face that came on next was a familiar one. Tightly curling black hair, a full rich mouth and expressive eyes—and the warm voice of June Maling. "Well, I didn't do so badly. Let's see the profile, John Hughes."

John obediently turned for the side shot and then turned back. "How did you—who told you? I mean—"

"Don't be silly. Old Wiggins told me, of course. Isn't it exciting?"

Old Wiggins was the esteemed and renowned Secretary of Science, Letitia P. Wiggins.

John said, "Wah—urf, I, well glup—"

"French?" June asked. "John, are you busy, tonight?"

"Hunk—zee-pelf awk." John paused and clenched his hands. *"No!"*

"Why don't you fly out? It would be a terrific gag, baby. My publicity man can get you a reservation on the seven-o'clock saucer from this end. With the difference in time you would be here at four twenty. It's only a twenty-minute trip."

"Urk amp—" John started and then Pete was standing next to him. Pete said, "We'll get him on the saucer, Miss Maling. Treat him right. He's fragile."

June winked. "I'll be waiting at the airport, Johnny. I hope you're photogenic."

The screen faded back into the wall, and there was silence.

IV

JOE broke it. "Dream girl," he said with quiet scorn. "Just a gag to her. Charming, beautiful June Maling, idol of the airwaves, Hollywood opportunist, product of her publicity. You sure picked a winner, John Hughes."

"Shut up, Joe," Pete said. "John, you've got to go. You make a good impression on her and she'll use her influence to keep us out of trouble. You heard her call the Secretary 'Old Wiggins'—Wiggins must have called her as soon as she saw her name. She may not be what you hoped, John, but she's a good girl to have on our side."

"Of course I'm going," John said. "You boys are awfully quick to judge somebody, aren't you?"

Pete looked at Joe, who was looking at Pete. They shrugged. Joe said, "You'll remember, John, that her card didn't go through the machine."

"So?"

"So all they have to do is run it through and see if the eye picks it. If she complains they might just do that."

"She isn't the kind of girl," John said, "who'd put anybody in the soup."

"Of course not," Pete said.

"Of course not," Joe agreed.

The saucer was a ship that made time, powered by centrifugal blast, kept aloft by its anti-gravity delurium. The saucer came into the L.A. International Airport at 16:20 and the business started there.

Cameras and noise and faces, one face more obnoxious than the others, the fac

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of Glenn Jalkowski and what was he doing here? One face dear to John, and its owner threw her arms around him and then it was pure reflex action on his part. His arms went around her, his own true love, June Maling.

And the cameras ground and John trembled, forcing all the implications from his mind, concentrating on the single knowledge that *this was June Maling in his arms.*

And then Jalkowski said, "Hey, easy, I'm still here," for the grinding cameras and the listening mikes. Jalkowski had a patch of medicated tape across his lower lip.

June pulled away from John and looked into his battered face. "Glenn told me about the fight," she said. "He's —unpredictable, isn't he?"

"He's a mug," John said. "Let's face it."

She laughed. They all laughed—but Glenn Jalkowski.

They went to *Lillian's.* In Hollywood, everybody who is anybody goes to *Lillian's.* They had a table for eight. Glenn sat on one side of June, John on the other. The rest were just court followers, gossip columnists and June's agent, Wendy Williams. Wendy sat on John's left.

She was a plain girl but sharp enough. She said, "Play along, John Hughes. It may be nauseating but it won't last forever. And it's better than twenty years in the clink."

John studied her for seconds. "Has Hollywood got a pipeline into Science? What did you hear about that?"

"Everything I heard I heard from Glenn," Wendy told him. "He must have some connection there. My job is to watch out for Miss Maling's interests. *And* my ten percent. Don't count me among your friends, John Galveston Hughes."

Then June was saying, "Wendy, will you quit monopolizing John? Be satisfied with your percentage."

They all laughed. It was a joke.

He looked around at all of them, the stooges who were enjoying this immense gag. June Maling and the typist from Science, this Cinderella man, what a laugh. He looked around at their greedy phoney faces and almost saw their knives. *Malice in Wonderland,* he thought, and she's their queen.

Grow up, John Hughes, open your eyes. Sharpen up, little man, you're in the majors now.

One of the columnists asked, "How long has this romance been going on, Mr. Hughes? June's been very coy about the story."

"On my side since I was eighteen," John said. "But Miss Maling didn't know about that." He turned to face her. "Did you, darling?"

She looked at him in grave bewilderment. "Why—I—"

They laughed, all but June. John said quietly, "Joke. The least you could do is laugh at my jokes."

"I'll laugh at the next one," she said. "I have to ration my laughs out here or get wrinkles." Her voice seemed tight.

"Seriously," the columnist continued, "just when did you two meet?"

WENDY nudged John and he realized that none of the stooges here knew about Mars. That announcement had not been made as yet. He said, "When did we meet, dear, and where? You know—my memory . . ."

Laugh.

June said, "The College Seventy-three game, wasn't it? Last year when Glenn was still my favorite athlete?"

Wendy said, "It was at that benefit in Washington, June. On October twenty-second at the party the Lunts threw after the benefit. It was love at first sight."

The talk went on, the laughs went on, the food came on and the drinks. The party moved on—to *Sadie's* and the *Redwood Room* at the *Chaplin.* New faces supplanting the old, fresh laughs for the tired, old gags in new settings.

June stayed bright and chipper. Physically she was all he'd ever dreamed and all she showed was her physical

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side. But this pace and these people were her choice and that was as much character analysis as any reasonable man needed.

At 1620 it had started—at 0230 there were only four left of the original party—John, June, Wendy and Glenn. They stood on the sidewalk in front of the *Redwood Room* after ten hours of hilarity and June seemed as fresh as ever. John said, "You might do all right on Mars at that. You've certainly got the stamina."

She looked at him gravely. "Was that true what you said about—about since you were eighteen?"

"It was true."

Wendy said quickly, "You're tired, June. This has been a busy day."

"Shut up, Wendy," June said and continued to look at John. "I've a guest appearance, tomorrow morning at ten. Do you want to meet me there, at NBC, around ten-thirty?"

John nodded. Wendy said, "Meet *us*, you mean, June."

June ignored her. "At ten-thirty, at NBC, in the lobby. Your room is reserved at the *Jericho*. Glenn will drive you there now."

"I'm seeing you home, June," Glenn said.

"Not tonight, you're not," June said. "Call a cab, Wendy."

Glenn started to say something and must have changed his mind. He said to John, "This way, lover."

There was scarcely any traffic. Glenn's Revere moved down the quiet streets without even a tire murmur, like a ghost car. Glenn kept his eyes straight ahead. "You monkeys sure gimmicked that compto-determina, didn't you?"

"No—but the list seems to bother you even though you must know Miss Maling is going to back out."

"You're not making sense."

"Maybe I'm too tired. You came all the way from Hollywood this afternoon just to moan about her name being on that list. If you had stopped to think you wouldn't have done that."

"And why wouldn't I?"

"Because you know she won't go. You revealed to me that you have an informant employed by Science. You wanted the machine changed back. If it had been changed, as you claimed, how would you know it? If I'd changed it, would anybody else in Science know it?"

"That's too complicated for me," Glenn said quietly. "You've had too much to drink, boy."

"Maybe. Only I keep wondering if the machine hadn't been gimmicked—but not for this list."

The Revere slowed. "Keep talking, junior."

The street they were now on was almost completely dark and ahead a *Dead End* sign loomed in the headlights.

"It broke down a few days ago," John went on dully. "One of *your* boys—All-American?"

The Revere stopped. There were no homes along here. The dead end fronted on a canyon and the sides around them were thick with underbrush. John said, "They're expecting me at the Jericho. June knows you're taking me home. I can't *prove* anything. Don't play it dumb, halfback." Words, words, words. . . .

And while he talked he was groping for the door handle. He saw Glenn turn and the glint of something in his hand and he found the handle.

The big door flew open, and he was running for the safety of the underbrush. There was no shot. But there was the sound of footsteps behind him as he plunged through the whippy branches of the shrubbery. Then he stumbled forward into a small glade.

He had his hands beneath him and was pushing himself up when Glenn crashed him. Glenn's big hands were groping for his throat and John went sideways, crablike, trying to rise.

Glenn flipped him over on his back and now Glenn's hands were around his throat, his strong fingers digging for the windpipe. John put a knee where he thought it might do some good.

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Glenn grunted and doubled and John scrambled to a sitting position and put a swinging elbow to Glenn's mouth. He was clear of him. He rose and, standing above him for a second, caught the halfback with a swinging foot above the temple.

And then John started to holler at the top of his lungs.

IT WAS a big lobby, high-ceilinged and impressive. A man sat on a davenport at the far end and a girl came out from a studio door.

John rose from the davenport and the girl said, "Hello, hero. You were a meanie, not to appear on Jane's program."

"I've had enough publicity, and enough yak-yak. And where's Wendy?"

"Home in bed, I hope."

"And the cameramen and the columnists and all those—?"

"I don't know. Tell me what happened last night, John Galveston Hughes."

They walked out together while John told her and added the background.

"I guess these—foreign agents figured Glenn would be the best guy to put in a kick since he could use you as his excuse for seeing me. You see, they had it originally gimmicked so all their lads and lassies would land on Mars. They'd doctored the coloring of the cards to match what the original scanner wanted and when this new list came out they had to have a *reason* to kick and sent for Glenn. He's been one of them ever since he was a soph in college though he didn't know about the Mars deal until they sent for him."

"And last night he tried to kill you."

"He tried."

"And you—beat him. Were you—are you . . . ? You don't *look* strong."

"I was a track man," John said, "in college. A little football, too but I didn't get the kind of blocking Glenn got."

"And, you and this Joe and this Pete, *did* you gimmick the machine? The papers weren't very clear on that."

"Weren't they? Neither is Science or State or Internal Security or External Security. The list stands, excepting for that dynamic video star, June Maling, who will undoubtedly pull strings."

He paused in front of a hamburger stand. "Do you like hamburgers? That's the only honest thing in this town."

"I *love* 'em," she said and they went in. They sat on stools, at the counter, and John told the counterman, "Two triple dipsy doodles with all embellishments and accompaniments."

June said, "The papers also mentioned a Matilda Glutz and hinted she was in love with you. Was she a—foreign agent, too?"

"So it seems," John said, "though I didn't know it."

"Was she—is she pretty, John?"

He shrugged. "I've seen worse."

June laughed. "Now who's going Hollywood? John, I've met her—at one of Letitia Wiggins' parties."

And they laughed, because this was a joke and not a bad one. June said, "I've heard other rumors, John. About a new deal on Mars."

"It could be true," John said. "That would be murder for you, wouldn't it? The wife of a colonist. No *Lillian's,* no *Sadie's,* no *Redwood Room.* No dominance, no servants, no adoring fans. Just one guy to adore you and hold you close through the cold Martian nights. That would be hell, wouldn't it?"

"No," June said, "though it would depend on the guy. Johnny, baby, let's start the new deal now. You ask *me,* Johnny, for a change."

He didn't have to. He looked at her and it was all there, the warmth, the fire, the whole of June Maling. It was all there in her eyes, waiting to be taken.

"Oh, baby!" Johnny said. "Holy cow!"

June's hand found his below the counter. "We're going to have fun," she said. "It won't be *all* drudgery. We're going to have fun, Johnny lover."

There wasn't any doubt in Johnny's mind about that.

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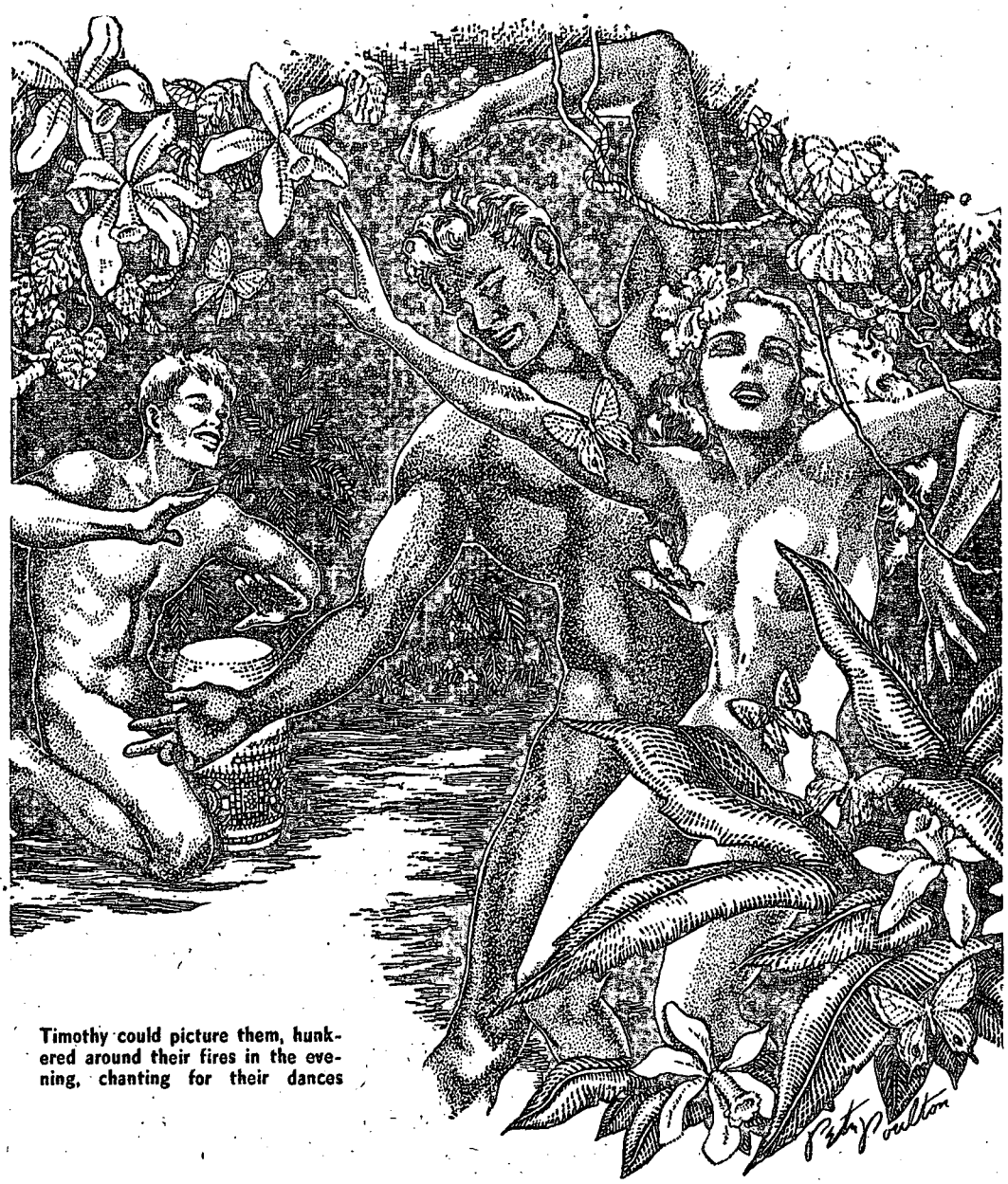
The White Fruit of



Timothy could picture them, hunkered around their fires in the evening, chanting for their dances

The auctioning of the five planets marked the end of one part of life, the beginning of a new, for Timothy Trench

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Banaldar

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

THE auctioning of the five planets took place in the quiet main lounge of the Transgalactic Development in the corporation's new and glistening building at the corner of Reforma and Insurgentes in Mexico City, capital of the world.

For Timothy Trench, ex-employee of Transgalactic, sitting tense and expectant in a back row seat waiting for the auction to begin, it was the end of one part of life, the beginning of a new. He touched his pocket and felt the reassuring bulge of the wallet.

In the wallet, crisp as a celery kiss, was the cashier's check. It was the hour that marked the end of five long years of planning. That check for two thousand mil-pesos was the result of pleading, begging, demanding—arguing the others down.

Five years before Timothy Trench had been a member of the habilitation crew which Transgalactic had put on the surface of the third of the five planets. At that time it had been known by a number. Now its name was Banaldar. In the hot harsh winds, in the drifting sand, in the salt-crusted seas, Timothy saw what he had been looking for.

Only a visionary's mind could have worked that way. Through the long months of building the power source, of starting the long slow process of oxygenation that would bring to Banaldar a cycle of seasons, a climate fit for man, Timothy had pictured the rolling hills clad in green, the river beds filled once more, the breezes gentle and full of the smell of growing things.

During the last month, after all the soil tests were in, they had brought down the torrential rains and then, low and fleeting, the aircraft had spread billions of seeds in thousands of varieties in the long-dead soil of Banaldar. The small animals were released and the habilitation crew left, taking Timothy along—leaving his dreams behind.

The lounge was filling up. He looked around, saw the agents of overpopulated areas, the buying agents of the industrial combines, the agents of the speculators who clawed into the crust of far places. They would be due for a surprise.

He remembered the look of Banaldar when he had last seen it. The only trace of the life that had once been there were the enormous trees—long dead. They dwarfed the redwoods of Earth and their bark was like wrought iron, so grooved and striated that a bold man could climb three hundred feet to the lowest limbs. Timothy had climbed and looked out over the world that he vowed would once be his.

It had taken five years to make certain that it would be his. He knew that one day Transgalactic would put the five planets up for auction. Two thousand

EVER SINCE the first of our arboreal ancestors studied and understood the function of a pitcher plant, or perhaps a Venus fly-trap, the idea of a vegetable growth which could and would entrap and absorb a human has been one of the well-springs of nightmare. For some reason the thought of becoming breakfast food for an outrageous orchid or perhaps an overbloated sweet potato holds more intrinsic horror than the fangs of the tiger or the tentacles of the kraaken.

Since such plants are uncommon, if indeed they exist at all, upon Earth, it is perhaps natural for imaginative authors to envision them as existing upon alien planets. Furthermore, the mere removal of such growths across a few parsecs of space does nothing to remove the immediacy of their terror, a fact which Mr. MacDonald makes extremely evident.

—*The Editor*

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young people were behind the crisp check in Timothy's billfold. Slowly and relentlessly he had sold them his dreams.

A world to call your own—a beautiful Earth-size planet with rolling seas and gentle green hills—a place to become home, to raise children in, to set up the sort of society that Earth had long lacked and sadly needed. Maybe—*maybe*—it was the chance mankind had been waiting for. A thousand years would tell.

Some of those who had pleaded to join the group Timothy had turned down, regretfully but firmly. Others had been so desirable that, even though they could contribute next to nothing, he had spent months convincing them they should come.

It is no small thing to ask a man to move across space to a new world. But some dreams cannot be denied.

The auctioneer moved quietly to the front of the lounge and all conversation stopped.

EVEN with the amplifiers his voice was so low as to be difficult to hear. "Today, gentlemen, we are auctioning off the five planets of Epsilon Aurigae, a convenient fifty-two light years from Earth.

"Those of you who have attended other auctions are familiar with our system. All bidding must open at our stated figure, which is just sufficient to cover our development expense plus a reasonable profit percentage. These five planets are the most desirable offered in recent months, all of them close enough to Earth-size to obviate gravitational difficulties, all of them quickly adjusting to our habitational procedures.

"There are three other planets circling the sun in question, two of them too close to be made livable and one too far out. The five will be offered for sale in the order of their distance from the sun. You have all had an opportunity to look over the charts, specifications and space photographs.

"The first planet has been named, in our literature, Caenaral. The minimum bid is eight hundred and eight mil-pesos. I am bid nine hundred. Nine hundred is the bid. Nine twenty-five is the bid.

"Worlds for sale, gentlemen. You will make no mistake on any one of these planets. Mineral concentrations are high. Nine hundred and fifty, fifty, fifty, seventy-five, one thousand. I hear one thousand. . . ."

The bidding went on. Timothy Trench slouched in his chair and the auctioneer's voice faded from his consciousness. He thought of other things. The first city, not really a city, must be where the great river emptied into the largest sea. They must not permit ugliness. For a long time the ship they traveled in must be their base.

The first planet was knocked down for one thousand seven hundred and sixty mil-pesos. The second one, less desirable, went for thirteen hundred mil-pesos. Timothy came quickly out of his dreams as he heard the man speak at last of Banaldar.

His strategy was firm in his mind. Leave the bidding alone—let it climb to where the bidding began to slow down—wait until the last moment and then put in a bid a full hundred mil-pesos higher.

He sat with his fingernails biting into his palms. He was a tall man of thirty with coarse ginger-colored hair, with eyes used to probing vast distances. The bidding soared quickly to thirteen hundred and fifty, then began to slow down. As he was getting ready to put in his bid it gathered new momentum and went rapidly up to sixteen hundred and twenty-five. One of the chemical outfits made it sixteen thirty.

"I have been bid sixteen hundred and thirty. Do I hear forty? Sixteen hundred and thirty. Going for sixteen hundred and thirty. Going for—"

"Seventeen hundred and fifty!" Timothy shouted.

The auctioneer peered at Timothy, recovered his aplumb. "The young man has made a bid of seventeen hundred and fifty. Going for—"

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"I bid nineteen hundred," a thick voice said. Timothy gasped and turned quickly. A heavily bearded man had bid the new figure. His clothes were rumpled and soiled.

"Two thousand!" Timothy said with a thin note of panic in his voice.

"Twenty-one hundred," the man said, his voice the slow and measured note of doom.

"Going for twenty-one hundred. Going, going, GONE to Mr.—uh—"

"I am Leader Morgan of the Free Lives," the rumpled heavy man said proudly.

"Oh? Yes, of course—the Free Lives," the auctioneer said. "You have the funds with you, of course."

"Hah!" Morgan said. "I notice you don't ask these others. But you ask me. *Ruth! Harriet!* Take him the money."

Two women came from the back. They staggered under the weight of heavy suitcases. They were drab worn-looking females with tight thin-lipped mouths, narrow eyes, long gray tubular dresses of a style utterly outmoded.

The auctioneer laughed in an embarrassed way. "It will take a long time to count all this."

Morgan stood up. "Count it when you have time. There are twenty-five hundred mil-pesos there. Count it and send me my change." He walked out.

Timothy caught the man in the main lobby. The man would have continued on if Timothy hadn't planted himself squarely in front of him. Morgan had a heavy animal smell about him. His small eyes were red-rimmed.

"Well?" he said.

"You bought Banaldar!"

"I seem to remember doing something of the sort, young fellow."

"This is serious to me. I—"

"Serious to you? Twenty-one hundred mil-pesos isn't a joke, my young friend."

"For five years I've been working and planning to buy Banaldar."

"So?"

"You *can't* take it this way. Look, give me some time. I'll see that you make a profit. Let me have some time and I'll buy it from you. I promise."

Morgan sucked at his teeth. He laughed. "No. We want it. It is a good place for the Free Lives. We go there now. We live there from now on. Not for five thousand mil-pesos can you have it. You know our group. We do not buy or sell for profit."

"You're some sort of a sect, aren't you?"

"Sect? No. We are men and women. We live the way men and women were meant to live."

He pushed by Timothy and walked toward the door, the two women followed him meekly. "What are you going to do on Banaldar?" Timothy asked hopelessly.

Morgan turned. "Do? We live naked and eat berries and hunt with stones and clubs. What do you think men are meant to do? Live like *this?*" He included in an expressive gesture all of the glitter and bustle of the capital. "No. We live in caves and we fill our bellies and breed our children and sleep well at night. Good day to you. I have a lot to do. We all leave soon, seven hundred of us."

When the auction was over Timothy sought out the representative of Transgalactic Development. The man said, "That was quite a surprise, wasn't it? I mean that bunch of crazy-heads buying themselves a planet. They've been chased out of the most respectable areas. Nudity and inability to accept moral codes have made them undesirable."

"How did they get that much money?"

The auctioneer shrugged. "I understand they've taken wealthy widows into the tribe with the understanding that they sign everything over to the Leader. There have been law suits but the Free Lives seem to be able to afford pretty good legal talent."

"I want to ask about something," Timothy said. "I've gone over the laws pretty carefully. If, for any reason, at the end of three years, the purchased planet has not been developed in any

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way and is not populated the sale can revert to the second highest bidder. Is that right?"

"Yes," the man said dubiously. "But only if the second bid money is left on deposit with Transgalactic as a guarantee of good faith. And I frankly don't see much point in such a move. Those Free Lives aren't going to vacate in a hurry. We have a lot of attractive planets in various stages of preparation for sale. Wouldn't it be better . . ."

Timothy Trench wrapped his big hand in the front of the auctioneer's jacket and shook him gently. "I want Banaldar," he said.

The man, who had started to be friendly, pushed Timothy's hand away coldly. "Suit yourself. The auction seems overcrowded with crazy people today. Come with me and we'll prepare the papers."

THE two thousand, infected by Timothy's dream, had impatiently awaited word of the purchase. Many of them had burned bridges behind them. Their immediate disappointment at losing out on the legendary Banaldar was submerged in a mighty and towering anger when they found that Timothy, in a moment of amazingly poor judgment, had put the fund out of their reach for a three-year period.

They cursed themselves for fools, cursed Timothy for a charlatan. Eyes which had looked to the stars turned regretfully back to Earth and to the construction of bridges to replace the burned ones.

Timothy, after getting word to all his followers, haunted the Free Lives. He could not believe that they would actually embark for Banaldar. But at last, one cool morning, he stood on Take-off Mesa in the state of Hidalgo and watched the unwashed sleazy women, the whining brawling children, the heavy-bodied men, all carrying bundles of personal effects, file aboard the chartered converted freighter. Leader Morgan stood off to one side and watched them file aboard, scratching himself ruminatively.

Then there was the ballooning antigrav lift, the straightening by means of the gyroscopes. At the warning gun Timothy, the only spectator, turned away as did the port crews. The flash lit the countryside like a vast photobulb. When he looked again the freighter was gone. Timothy took the shuttle back to Mexico City and got thoroughly and completely drunk on a combination of mescal and pulque.

Two weeks later he awoke in a rancid hotel room in Rio, broke, dirty and with a bad case of the shakes. He presented himself at the nearest Reclaim Office, signed the agreement and was forthwith cleaned, fed and given employment. He worked mechanically and well and did not permit himself to think. To think meant Banaldar and thoughts of Banaldar hurt. It wasn't good to think of his virgin world infested with the Free Lives.

He could picture them, hunkered around their fires in the evening, strong teeth ripping meat from small animal bones, chanting gutturally for their crude dances—a scene from the dawn of man—whereas Timothy had planned that Banaldar would be the high noon of mankind. To think of Banaldar given over to brute orgy was like thinking of a lovely mistress assaulted in the dark alleys of an evil city.

And so Timothy Trench avoided thought as much as possible.

At the end of a full year he found that he had saved a respectable sum, two cien-pesos. For a time the money meant nothing to him. He was too far sunk in gloom. And then he began to wonder how Banaldar looked at the end of a year. It was, he guessed, a form of masochism.

He wondered and slowly wonder turned to determination. Maybe Leader Morgan didn't like Banaldar any more. Maybe he could be talked into leaving or selling. Determination strengthened into an iron resolve. Timothy began to

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haunt the spaceports, to read the classified advertising.

And at last he found the two-man launch he wanted. It was six years old but the hull was sound. It had logged only thirty-one months and the agency man said that it had belonged to an elderly couple who always brought it in like a feather.

Finally the agency man said, "Okay, okay. So we take a loss on it. I'll let you have it for two and a half cien-pesos. Nobody ever made a better buy. You'll never regret it, fella."

Within two weeks, Timothy had got his license renewal, his space permit and his astrogation pattern. He took off for Banaldar.

AS the launch bucked and shuddered and trembled its way out of hyperflight, Timothy gagged and retched and shook his head until his vision cleared. It took a half hour to pick up his points of manual reference and plot his position. And then, with deep excitement in him, he saw the pin-head of light slowly growing larger, centered on the cross-hairs of the landing screen.

Within two hours continental land masses appeared, cloud formations like tiny white scatter rugs against them. He set the launch in orbit, braking it into concentric circles, watching the skin gauges as he hit the atmosphere. At ten thousand feet he nullified his own gravity to the equivalent of a five pound mass, peeled back the direct vision port and cruised slowly across the smiling sunlit face of the planet.

It was as he had imagined it would be. Around the tropical waist of Banaldar the vegetation was lush. Vast temperate plains were covered with grasses and he could see the waves that went across them as the winds blew. The seas were deep blue, rimmed with white surf. He found a desert and frowned, making plans as to how to correct it, then remembered with empty heart that this planet was not his.

He felt no need of sleep. He cruised on the edge of night, adjusting his speed to the planet rotation so that for many hours he was in perpetual dawn, the sun behind him.

At last he remembered that he was looking for the Free Lives. He had seen no sign of habitation but then he hadn't been searching diligently. Remembering their penchant for nudity he limited his search to the semi-tropical regions. The dense tropics would be too alive with the insects which had been released, the more temperate regions would be too cool.

He dropped to two thousand feet for his search. Exhaustion came before success. He fell asleep at his task and the launch settled slowly, landing with a gentle jar that did not awaken him.

After many hours he awoke refreshed, ate with new hunger and continued the search. And at last he found them. It angered him to see where they had settled. Right on the spot that he had once picked as potentially the finest on the planet. His judgment had proved to be right. The wide green-tinted river emptied down into the blue sea. The grasses were high. Dotted here and there were the scars of their fires and a haphazard arrangement of several hundred brush huts.

Timothy set the launch in the middle of the crude village. The little motor chattered busily as it unwound the port. He restored full gravity and felt the launch sink a few inches into the ground.

Timothy took a deep breath and stepped out onto the planet, stepped out onto his broken dream, stepped out to feel the sun warmth on his face, to smell growing things, to taste the spiced breeze against his lips. He turned quickly toward the launch and for a few moments he wept. Then, squaring his shoulders, he turned back and walked toward the nearest hut.

"Hallo!" he called. "*Hallo* there!"

No answer. He frowned and walked to the hut, noting that the grasses seemed to be recapturing the paths that wound

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through them. The crude doorway was low and the hut was windowless but tiny spots of sunshine slipped through holes in the brush and made yellow coins on the packed dirt floor.

Grass was beginning to sprout from the floor itself. A wide bed of grasses in the corner was parched and dry.

He called again and again, going from hut to hut, his voice loud in the great silence. At last he admitted to himself that the village, for some reason, was deserted. He found eight crude graves, a hundred small piles of sun-whitened animal bones, a listless attempt at the cultivation of wild grains, a broken bow.

In four days he had covered all of the rest of the planet and a new wild hope began to fill him. The Free Lives seemed to have disappeared from the surface of Banaldar. The impossible and improbable had happened. He whistled and sang as he searched. He made little poems about the personal habits of the Free Lives, admiring himself when they scanned.

And, finding nothing, he returned to the village to look for clues as to what might have happened.

Trees have leaves. That is a normal thing and thus a thing which is not noticed. Timothy had not noticed the leaves during his first look at the village. He noticed them the second time. He looked casually at the trees and looked away, then swiveled back. The trees had leaves! Those five hundred foot monsters had leafed!

He realized at once what had happened. Throughout the long dead years before Transgalactic had arrived to give the planet life again a thin feeble germ of life had remained in those monster trees, the root system reaching far enough down to tap the limited moisture. And now, with the new atmosphere and the warmth it brought, with the rains started again, with the whole planet stirring with life, the trees had come back.

It made him feel humble to think of the remarkable tenacity those aged giants had displayed. The mere idea of computing their age dizzied him.

FOR a little time his thoughts of the Free Lives were forgotten. Timothy walked through the waist-high grass toward the row of trees. Of twenty-one huge trees, only three had failed to come back.

They had leafed densely, making blots of shadow so dark that the grass was failing around the trunks. The wind had torn a leaf loose. He picked it up by the edge. It was a full yard across, colored a deep satin green. The stem of the leaf was as big around as his thumb.

He stood in the tree shadows and a curious feeling of peace came over him. It made him feel as though he had come home after a long, wearying journey.

He stood and tilted his head back and his glance ran up the trunk, up to the dark and secret places under the umbrella of overlapping leaves. Up there was rest and surcease and the soft happy end of striving and wanting and trying. In the gloom he could make out the clusters of fruit, pale fruit, swaying heavily, and he heard a warm sighing that was pleasant to his ears.

He yawned so deeply that he shuddered and, without conscious thought, he walked to the trunk of the tree, found the places to put his hands and feet and began climbing methodically up the trunk, not looking back, his eyes on the heavy darknesses above him. There was a happy song in him.

Not much longer now. This is where I belong. This place has been waiting in the back of my heart. Climb a bit faster and then it will come sooner. Climb faster. It's been waiting a long time. There's the first limb, just overhead. Move over to the side now and climb up even with it, beyond it, up and up and up into the darkness and the beauty and the perfection. . . .

He went higher, climbing as though with long practice, his hands finding the holds before his eyes saw them. He realized he was waiting for something.

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When he saw it he seemed to recognize it. It was a long flexible green-ribbed stalk, as big around as his wrist, the blunt end of it cupped and damp. He stopped climbing and clung to the bark. He smiled at the stalk. It brushed his shoulder, nuzzled like a puppy at his neck. He saw the pale fruit.

They hung in clusters, the Free Lives. They hung white and fat and soft, the green stalks entering the backs of their necks. They swayed a little in the breeze as they hung there. Their eyes were almost closed and their faces wore a look of utter and ineffable content.

Their fat-ringed arms and legs hung limp and their pallor was of a whiteness faintly tinged with green. From their parted lips came the soft minor-key sighing that he had heard from the ground, a sighing of ecstasy. Somehow the children were the worst. And all of them were incredibly bloated.

HORROR broke the spell. The thing that nuzzled at the back of his neck had begun to nibble with a million little needle-teeth. Clinging with one hand Timothy struck it away, felt the tearing pain, felt the wetness run down between his shoulder blades. In his haste he nearly fell as he clambered down. The stalk reached down and hit him a bruising blow across the shoulders.

Timothy, gasping and sweating in panic, climbed down and down. He had lost the ease with which he had climbed up. When he was well out of the reach of the stalk, the feeling of peace and well-being suddenly became intensified. It was a siren song. He clung motionless, wanting to climb back up. But he looked up at the white fruit, shut his teeth hard, continued descending.

Fifteen feet from the ground his hold slipped. He fell heavily, rolled to his feet and ran in panic away from the trees. A hundred yards away he dropped and lay panting, half-sobbing.

Back in the launch he dressed the circular wound in his neck and then stretched out on the bunk.

It would be so easy. Return to Transgalactic and claim that the planet had been vacated and demand the right to take possession. They might not give immediate approval but within a year and four months the three year period would be up and they would have to approve. Transgalactic might insist on a search of the planet but the odds were against their finding the Free Lives. Then he could warn the two thousand about the trees. "What do I owe those Free Lives?" he thought. "Dirty, primitive little bunch of misfits!"

But he thought of the children. The trees emitted some sort of hypnotic control. The specialists could find out what band the waves were on and shield themselves against it. Then the Free Lives could be cut down. Maybe the physiological changes had been so severe that to cut them down would mean killing them. Why take the chance? But he realized that he was rationalizing. The chance had to be taken. Humans deserved better than to be enlisted into the life cycle of a plant.

His mind made up, the loss of the planet a sickness within him, Timothy took off and drifted outside the atmospheric envelope that insulated spacecasts. With a fifty-two-minute transmission time he made his emergency report to Central Communications on Earth's moon. He waited and at last the answer came, promising a rescue ship within fourteen days.

When the rescue mission arrived the neuro-surgeons immediately took charge of Timothy Trench and it took them eleven days to bring him back from the brink of nearly hopeless insanity.

They found then that, during the fourteen days of waiting, the fruit had ripened, fallen, burst and its seed had taken root in the damp soil under the trees. Great care was taken to eliminate all the pale green shoots as well as the massive trees.

Transgalactic decided to make an exception to the waiting time in Timothy's case.

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The Last Story

by Alexander Samalman

The ghost of Dead-Eye Dick wails through the era of perfection!

BY THE year 2,160 of the Associated Nations of the Earth, fiction had been outlawed. As set forth in the decree of 2,135 A. D., all persons engaged in "writing, publishing, offering for sale, displaying publicly or causing to be read," any works of literature —save those confined to purely educational or practical facts—were liable to execution or banishment.

The change had been long in coming. For centuries people had curiously clung to the odd, futile practise of writing and reading belles lettres. Unscrupulous and antisocial individuals surreptitiously continued to fashion romances and lyrics. This childish diversion had so strong a hold upon the populace that it seriously interfered with progress.

In vain did seers and prophets of the New Order hold forth against such atavism. In vain did they point out that in the Present Era of Perfection the need for delusion, the necessity for a psychological release, had vanished. Writing, they urged, was only a form of wish fulfillment. Since all desires were being satisfied under the New Order, literature was seditious. Fame having been made illegal under the decree of 2,043, and money having been abolished by the noteworthy Texas Declaration of 2,015, there was neither money nor fame to be gained by means of verbal-expression. For the sake of helping to preserve the forests alone, argued the World Leader, it was the duty of every loyal citizen to desist from sentimental outpourings on paper.

Ultimately the public surrendered the majority of its books, which were ceremoniously incinerated. Many slyly withheld the works of Shakespeare and foregathered in underground tunnels to read them. But by the year 2,160 it was confidently believed that the world had been purged of this and other puerile influences. Literature had been conquered!

In that year, there dwelt on the Eighth Level of the Earth one Ignatius Korsantic, a man one hundred and four years old, who in his early youth had been an author. Regarded with tolerance by his neighbors, he was believed utterly reformed. Like them, he spoke with contempt of past civilizations.

But secret yearnings burned in the breast of Ignatius. Sometimes a far-away look came into his eyes . . . and

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once they were seen to gleam with the particularly obnoxious expression of the literateur. These things were overlooked because of his advanced age. But had the neighbors known—

* * * * *

IGNATIUS was writing a story!

Yes, while nobody suspected him, in the wee hours after 8 P. M., when the Universal Bedtime was signalized each evening by the shutting off of the power in the Universal Lighting Plant which served the entire world, Ignatius, who possessed hidden relics of the dim, ancient past—a box of matches and a candle—toiled mightily with a blood-and- thunder epic of the Old West, a glamorous, glowing romance of the cowboy era. Writing slowly and carefully, at the rate of a sentence an evening, and in constant fear of apprehension and capture, he ultimately completed an opus of five thousand words.

Then, in shivery dread, he stole in the dead of night to the Ninth Level of the Earth, to visit one he had known in days gone by, a patriarch almost his own age named Jonathan Hearsay, who at the age of twenty-one had edited the last of the pulps—*Western Whimsies*. Unobserved, he slunk into Hearsay's home. Locks and keys had long since been abolished, had gone into limbo, in fact, with the disappearance years before of all necessity for stealing.

Bending over Hearsay's sleeping-machine, his pulses hammering, Ignatius whispered daring words:

"I have written a story."

Hearsay jumped up to startled attention.

"What! Don't you realize, man—"

"I know, Jonathan. I know what it means, but I couldn't help myself. I—I—it was stronger than myself, Jon—"

Hearsay's face paled, seemed to age.

"Of course," he muttered, "I'll never report you. I seem to understand—to some degree—the great temptation. But how—wha—"

"It's a Western," proclaimed Ignatius, now calmer and considerably encouraged. "A real Western, like the one you bought from me in—"

"*Shhh!*" Hearsay put his fingers to his lips. "There are spies everywhere. They suspect me, too, of cherishing desires to start a movement for the restoration of publishing. We're in deadly danger. Tell me," he added, his eyes brightening, "are there rustlers in it?"

"Yes, rustlers and—"

"And is the ranch in danger?"

"Yes, Jonathan. And it's saved by Buck Horton, who faces tough *hombres* for the sake of the girl he loves. Driven to the hoot-owl trail by a crooked sheriff, he swaps lead with human polecats of the rangeland! He's the quickest man on the draw in the town of Big Water and—"

"*Ahhh!*" Spasms of pleasure contorted Hearsay's face. "Just like old times! Let me see it! Can we—"

Ignatius, for reply, took out his last match, the remaining half-inch of candle, and a rolled manuscript. By the flickering light, Hearsay read the last story of them all, while Ignatius looked on with the pathetic look of an author having a story read before his very eyes by an editor.

There, in that room, the two men moved back almost a century. Cracking six-guns, stampeding cattle, and yowling coyotes miraculously sprang into new life. The absorption of the men, and the critical faculties brought into play, were those of a forgotten period. Ignatius could hardly believe he was living in the year 2,160.

Even the four-dimensional supertelevision set in a corner of the room did not at once bring him back to reality. Then suddenly he realized that the light of the candle was enough to put the set in working motion, that some restless sleeper, somewhere, might see a shocking spectacle. Ignatius shivered with the knowledge of certain doom.

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HEARSAY finished the story.

Ignatius bent forward eagerly. Again he was plunged back in spirit to the past.

"What do you say, boss?" he whispered. "That's the stuff, isn't it? Hits the nail on the head, doesn't it? It's got action and a good plot and—"

Hearsay raised his hand, motioning for silence.

He got out of the sleeping-machine, went to the wall nearest it. Slowly, he began to remove several of the sizeable slabs of stone which formed the wall. He then turned back to Ignatius, a crumpled something in his hand.

"Of all the past," he said slowly and sadly, "I have preserved but one memento. It is the sole survivor of all its fellows, once so numerous as to be despised. But now! Ignatius, I shall turn it over to you—and I must say you deserve it."

Suddenly there came a mighty shout, a rush of hurried feet. A squadron of Universal Protectors hurled themselves into the room. The culprits were caught engaging in the very act of literary discussion! Two staccato reports sounded as two death rays sped unerringly toward their targets. Ignatius and the former editor fell and lay still, their life's journey done.

But on the face of Ignatius was a smile the like of which had not been seen for four-score years. Even the World Leader, when the scene was flashed to him, commented on the extraordinary joy and satisfaction written on the face of the corpse.

For, clutched in the hand of Ignatius, was—a genuine rejection slip!

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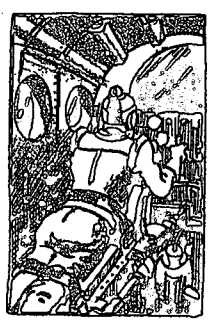

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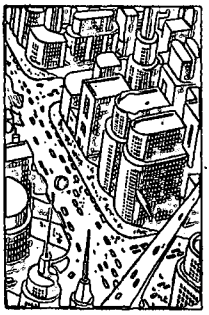

LOOKING FORWARD

—to the next issue!

WHEN a harassed World Council dug out Captain David Raven as the one Earthman qualified to conduct an under-cover investigation of subversive elements operating against the parent planet on the allied colony-dominions of Venus and Mars, they wanted an inconspicuous superman.

And in Raven, chief protagonist of the swift and stirring new Eric Frank Russell novel, THE STAR WATCHERS, which will appear in the November issue of STARTLING STORIES, they chose even more wisely than they suspected! For their agent was one of two individuals on Earth capable of matching wild talents with the twelve known types of extra-sensory abilities developed by the mutations of space-travel, including the Type-11 Insectvocals—"bug-talkers"—who could command armies of deadly little creatures to do their bidding.

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Curiously enough, Raven himself was an alien supposed never to take an active part in human affairs. Yet the situation was such that, despite the fear of disaster expressed by his mate, Leina, he felt that action was imperative. And action required that he travel to Venus in search of the roots of the conspiracy that threatened far more than one Solar System.

Mr. Russell, true master of suspense that he is, never lets the reader down in his newest novel. And once again he proves himself equally a master of humor and deft characterization, which combine to make his people live.

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[*Turn page*]

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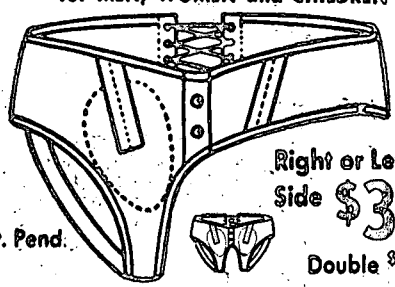

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Second-Person Singular

The November novelet spot will belong to that expert Taos, New Mexico, writing team, Mack Reynolds and Fredric Brown, and THE GAMBLERS. This is a most unusual story, not only for the desperate problem it propounds and solves to the satisfaction of its Moon-visiting protagonist and its readers alike, but for its writing, which is in the rarely but supremely effective second-person singular.

In it you will encounter some of the most menacing yet most understandable Aliens you have met in all science fiction—and you can be truly grateful that the Reynolds-Brown hero was able to understand them well enough to slow up their plans of visiting Earth. This is a battle of wits that should leave a lot of readers breathless to the end.

The short story lineup promises color, good writing and variety, and the features and departments will be as always. So don't give this one a miss—it looks like exciting fare all the way.

—THE EDITOR.

If You Hurry, You Can Still Get Your Copy of Our Big 1951—

WONDER STORY ANNUAL

America's Best Science Fiction Anthology

featuring a brilliant novel—

TWICE IN TIME

by

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

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(Continued from page 6)

Had Hitler stalled his direct attack on Russia until his southern armies had swept through Turkey and Asia Minor to the Caucasus he would have had a better chance—and later, when he did invade Russia, he spurned the efforts of millions of White Russians and Ukrainians to join the Nazi armies by treating them as lesser beings. Had the Japanese warlords confined their 1941-42 attacks to the East Indies, Malays, India and Siberia they could easily have divvied up the world's heartland with Hitler while the United States still debated intervention versus isolationism.

These moves appear obvious—in fact they appeared obvious when they occurred. Yet in all three cases the obvious was refused. Genghis Khan is supposed to have turned back from Europe because of overextended communications. This is hogwash, for his army lived chiefly on curds from their own mares' milk.

Actually Temudjin—as the Great Khan was known in his youth—was befriended in the course of the savage tribal warfare that made him the fierce conqueror he was by some Sino-Mongolian Nestorian Christians, then quite a prominent sect in Central and Eastern Asia. Some of these followers of Prester John rated high in his councils, helped bring about his generally pro-Crusader policy in Asia Minor, probably were agents in preventing an onslaught that would have turned Western Europe into another Russia.

Hitler's lapses seem to have been forced upon him by a pathological fear of Russia, Japan's by a somewhat similar fear of the United States. Yet how could any "expert," following the previous campaigns of the war and on them basing his prediction, foresee logically what happened? The answer is, of course, that none of them did.

Horseshoe Nails

Ben Franklin, with his "horseshoe nail" homily, had the right idea about the importance of the tiniest events in shaping massive policy and its effectiveness. The problem is how to find the horseshoe nails in the haystack of human history and then how to select the nails that overturn kingdoms. It is difficult enough in retrospect, impossible in advance of events.

Back in 1927, with two far-better-equipped groups planning to fly the Atlantic, no one predicted Lindbergh would make it first. Yet he came out of nowhere to do it and, in the light of after-events, his preparation was so thorough that it seemed amazing anyone doubted him.

In the light of which we are going to venture one prediction ourselves—that when man actually does get out into space, he will start from some totally unexpected source. So, having thus stuck our own collective neck out a parsec or two, the expected will probably occur for once.

We have a hunch this inability to foretell the future is a good thing. It certainly keeps life from being dull—which is probably the deadliest future of all.

RUNNING a letter column is not a parthenogenetic process, no matter how you look at it. The editor has to take what he gets and usually it comes in the form of a rake and a bed of nice hot coals—or Coles, an allusion which regular readers will understand here and now; neophytes a bit further on when the redoubtable Les & Es unlimber once more.

But occasionally a really intelligent epistle crosses our desk to shed a ray of light in the general atmosphere of insult and gore. We are leading off with such a letter this time out—one whose author seems to us to be so truly a man of distinction that no encomium can be rated too high.

WARNING—NO STORM
by Don Bendorf

Dear Sam: Before you start reading this I had better warn you—this letter is going to build up your ego something terrible. I think you are the best editor and one of the better authors in the business today. How you manage it I'll never know—editing at least four mags and turning out a steady stream of fine fiction in stf and sports.

Your mag, with the addition (finally) of your name on the contents page, is now perfect. Running through the May SS, I found all the stories excellent. I sat up till 2:30 finishing *The Seed From Space*. Gad how that man can write! Let's have more of Pratt or maybe another Pratt-DeCamp novel. The best novelet was the little gem *Letters of Fire* by Matt Lee. Cover by Bergey excellent. Love that new pliability in the pages. It lets me roll the mag up without ruining it. Enjoyed TEV as always. In short, absolutely no complaint. Rod

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Palmer, I'm ashamed of you. Don't you know a good thing?

In closing I wish to make like a chiseler. Do any readers have duplicates of any sf mags prior to November, 1949? If so (that is, after shipping them to Lieutenant Atkins) could they please send them to me? I'll pay but don't expect too much as I'm just a poor hard-working paperboy.—*613 McDonald Avenue, Santa Rosa, California.*

We've got a spare right arm we shall be perfectly delighted to let you have, Donald. As for Fletcher Pratt, he has short novels scheduled for both the October and December issues of our companion magazine, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, another in writing and several shorts written in collaboration with Walter Kubilius, science fiction's Joey Adams, on hand.

Yes, the sort of letter we like best—and now for the sort we usually get.

CONGRATULATIONS?
by W. F. La Bar

Dear Sam: As an old reader of science fiction I wish to congratulate you on your May issue. Sam, my boy, I've read science fiction since the days of *Dr. Hackensaw's Secrets* in the old SCIENCE AND INVENTION way back when and I must say this, your May issue, is by far the lousiest, most worthless collection of junk by hack writers I have seen in nearly thirty years. I do not exclude your lead story for it also falls in this class. Another issue like this and I'll give up science fiction as my favorite reading.—*Birchwood, Wisconsin.*

Well, into each life a little pain must fall, we suppose. Come to think of it, Mr. La Bar was quick, terse and very much to the point at that. We only wish he had not stabbed us through the cushion of our chair. But we also try to be both thorough and accurate as witness the following.

DIDN'T YOU . . . ?
by James D. Wallace

Dear Sir: In your enumeration of CAPTAIN FUTURE stories in the May, 1951, issue of SS, didn't you forget *Outlaw World* in the Winter, 1946, issue of SS?—*100 West 13th Street, Hutchinson, Kansas.*

Answer—yes.

HEART-BUST HOUSE
by George A. Foster

Sam Merwin! You have broken my heart! It just busted all to Hell! I refer to that line at the bottom of the masthead on May SS. . . it says *Sam Merwin, Editor.*

Don't get me wrong! I do *not* object to you as Editor. I'd yell blue murder at any change because you are my all-time favorite. My heartbreak is a different story.

I am a callow youth in *his late fifties.* I have been reading science fiction magazines ever since Gernsbach started publishing that type of magazine. Before that there were books—if one browsed and looked for them.

The point is that I read TWS and SS ever since they started. Yes—even back in the days when they were presided over by a preposterous hypothetical editor named "Sgt. Saturn". The stories were as good as any of the magazines—and the Sgt. Saturn thing intrigued me. I had to evolve me a theory to account for why any one would invent such a character instead of just publishing the editor's name.

So I worked out a fascinating theory. I figured the magazines were edited by two middle-aged female school-teachers who had been seduced away from their noble calling by an opportunity to earn a living wage. I imagined they felt they were practically living a life of shame by editing magazines with naked women on the covers and all that fighting and killing in the stories.

I pictured the two old dears slipping furtively in at the back door of a morning—and taking a quick glance around before they sneaked out at night.

It made sense to *me.* There was more evidence of conscientious editorial effort than in most such magazines. The patches in the stories were usually very neat—as if some one had done a careful job of invisible mending.

Moreover there was a standard of decency in TWS and SS that was unique. I mean that there was very little of the morbid or sadistic. Battle, blood and killing—but no torture scenes where the villain carves up young ladies or other detail designed to pander to the lust dreams of perverted adolescents. I pictured the editor setting her lips primly and grimly while she used a heavy blue pencil—then laboring carefully to cover the cut and patch.

I was so pleased with my brain-child—and I smiled at Sgt. Saturn and his swilling Zeno. The editors had my solid support.

Then the Sgt. Saturn thing was discontinued and the editor was just anonymous. The letter columns without the awkward lingo of Sgt. Saturn became an informal friendly hilarious romp. *TWS and SS became my favorites and I would not have thought of missing a copy of either.*

I still figured that the editor was one of those two female ex-schoolteachers. You see I had that idea stuck in my mind as the explanation of the anonymous editor angle. Moreover, there was a rollicking humor—a ready wit—and a background of solid common sense in the editorial comment in letter columns that made a big hit with me.

I began to get sentimental. Yes sir, I said to myself, "She is probably fat and homely as a sow—but she is one swell guy—and she has a wonderful sense of humor!" I began to toy with the idea that one of these times when I was down New York way I would try to meet the old gal—date her up and do the town. You know—a rollicking good time!

So what happens? I pick up the May issue of SS and read "SAM MERWIN, JR., EDITOR". I hastily read the editorial and the letter columns—heck—it's the same person as before!

But no female was ever named "SAM"—Gosh—it is a *man!*

Now see what ya done! A beautiful dream of

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romance all shot to Hell! *Why did ya have to do it, Sam? I mean all this anonymous stuff! Can't you see the havoc it has caused?* Can't you visualize the thousand and thousands of old guys like me, just gazing bitterly off into space with stark tragedy in their eyes while they mutter, "Durn it! I mighta knowed no female coulda had a sense of humor like that—or as good taste in picking out stories!"

Oh well—you are still my favorite editor—but darned if I'm going to hold hands with you!—*P. O. Box No. 300, Stoughton, Massachusetts.*

Come to think of it, George, we're darned if we're going to hold hands with *you*—but you do rate a nice gooey kiss from each of the old biddies you so fondly believed us to be. And thanks for what may be the funniest letter we have received in our seven-year tenure of this post.

However, it has competition immediately following. Wonder what got into our readers this time? We only hope it becomes both chronic and epidemic as in both the above and below—

OUT MONTANA WAY
by Chuck "Two-Gun" Jesse

Dear Eddyter: This may cum as a surprise to you, thet the cowpokes out here in Montana hev took to readin these siunce-fikshun magazeens insted of the Wild West Weakly. This onyewsool developmunt cum about this way. Sum time ago we run short on readin mateeryl here in the bunkhouse, so Shorty rode over to the naybers and borryed a hull gunnysak full of old magazeens, and amongst the western literachoor wuz a cupple of coppys of Startling Stories.

Me and Hackamore, (thets my side-kick) got to readin about them space ships and robots and things, and they prooved a great deal more interestin than rasslin broncs or totin six-guns, so we ben readin yore magazeen ever sense. Hackamore sez he figgers when they git this Attomik power workin, it'll jest about put us out of a job.

He sez they'll be abel to bild robot hosses to do all the wranglin, jest turn a few dials on the critter and he'll go herd cows fer a year without enny more fewl. This seems a lettle far-feched, but old Hackamore is kind of an awthoritty on them matters, havin been snowed in on a line camp one winter with nothin to read but an old fizziks book.

I see where there is sum talk of this Dianettiks in yore magazeen. The bosses son cum home frum college with one of them books tucked under his arm and sez he is a top hand at thet awdyting. He claims us cowpokes must be plumb full of them ingrums from always fightin broncs and gettin stomped by steers, so he's all set to corral our ingrums an make us all cleers. So far we been staying shy of him, cuz I don't rekollekt any of them ingrums setting around the bunkhouse waitin to be scooped up, so I reckon most of em must be purty hard to ketch.

I also see where sum onenlightened kerickters are a cussin this feller Bergey fer paintin them ondressed wimmen on the cover, claimin to be skeered to hev ther friends see what kind of magazeen ther bying. Dont pay no atenshun to these dudes cuz if they aint got enuf hair on ther chest to buy magazeens with pikchers of purty wimmen on the kuver without bein afrade ther frends will laff at em, then they shuddent be readin siunce-fikshun ennyway. Thet redhedded gal on the cuvver of yore May ishew is a mighty atracktiv critter, tho she looks to be kinda bewildurd—probubly wonderin how cum old Bergey got thet right hand showlder strap so tite.

Now I aint presumtoous enuf to make meny remarks about yore storees, but we shore liked the yarn of old Windyhams about the sillycon critter who disintergrayted when the peepul begin to holler at him. Hackamore sez it takes a man with onusuool branes to rite stuff like thet and I reckon he nose what hes talkin about. Ennyway, be sure to hev old Windy spin us another yarn like thet wun soon.

Well I guess thets about all Sam, jest thot I ott to let you no thet we read yore magazeen out hear in Montana too. If you ever git out this way, away frum them dudes back East, be shore to drop in and partake of sum of owr western hospitallity. We aint got none of them space ships out here yet, but I reckon you can get purty near the same effekt settin on the hurricain deck of a bronc.—*Rte. 1, Box 268, Miles City, Montana.*

Wal, much obleeged, pardnur, much obleeged. Actually we never have been able to write Western dialect (we have enough trouble deciphering its delicate nuances) but we shore do appreeshyate it when it come right from the chuck wagon. Watch out for those ingrums. We remember one that came from Providence and played pretty good tennis for Harvard years ago but he spelled it Ingraham.

TIME TO GET ROLLING
by Jack Harmon

Dear Ed: First of all I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for publishing the CAPTAIN FUTURE yarns. They were all superb—GREAT! But I predict that you will not have a moment's rest (I hope) until you reprint the first CF story (preferably in FSQ).

Now to why I wrote this letter. My uncle, R. O. Snow, was in the United States Air Corps during the last war. He was shot down and his left leg had to be amputated. Now he sits in a wheel-chair (he didn't want wooden legs) all day long doing almost nothing but reading (S-F if possible). He has read everything I have on S-F. Now he has hardly anything to read. I am asking—pleading to every S-F fan you have to help this former 2nd Lieutenant.

Please fans—send him some old S-F magazines or S-F books. I know that he would prefer old (the older the better) issues of SS and TWS since they are his favorites (plug for you Ed). If anybody has any extra old CAPTAIN FUTURE magazines, please send 'em. I know Bob would like them because CF is his favorite character and he has never seen a CF magazine.

Send all packages C.O.D.—I know Bob would be more than glad to pay the postage. His address is: R. O. Snow, 1031 Del Rosa, San Bernardino, Cali-

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fornia. I would like to add that Bob does not know anything about this—about my writing this letter. It sure would be a wonderful surprise to see packages arriving full of SCIENCE-FICTION magazines. So, get those mags rolling—it's for a wonderful guy.

Thanx to everyone.—*San Bernardino, California.*

It seems to us that Mr. Harmon has said about all there is to be said. From now on a little action is in order. Okay, gang?

NO MORE SHOCKS
by Marian Cox

Dear Ed: Of the sixteen readers who commented on your January cover, fifteen liked it. Wonder if this signifies something? What puzzles me is, why, after finally printing a decent cover, you gave us the one on the March issue. The May issue wasn't quite as bad, but it could have been better. Please give us covers that won't shock my friends and relatives. Most of them think that s-f is just 'junk' simply because of the covers used on so many of the mags. Let's try to improve them and (maybe) get a few new readers.

Can't Bergey draw men? We females would like to have a nice handsome man on the cover for a change. How about it?

"The Seed From Space" was about the best in the ish. I liked that ending. "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down" was cleverly written. The rest of the stories were about average with the exception of "Birthplace of Creation". That was far below average. It was poor even for a Captain Future story.

In "Letters of Fire" the huge advertising sign was reversed when viewed from the other side. However, if you have ever seen a sign painted on glass, from the wrong side, you'll remember that the letters themselves were reversed; not merely the words. Why weren't the letters reversed here?

I know I'm repeating myself, but *please* let's at least cover up the gals on the covers, if we can't remove them entirely.—*51 Cedar Lane, Hilton Village, Virginia.*

In editing *Letters of Fire* we made sure that the sign was backward and requested the printer to reverse the letters, which would have brought it out all right. Our surprise and dismay matched yours when we saw what actually appeared in print. Sorry. And we'll try to work a nice juicy hunk of what Hollywood calls beefcake into an early cover.

HEAD, SHOULDERS AND TORSO
by Ivan H. Copas

Dear Mr. Merwin: Seeing the May ish of STARTLING made me quite guiltily aware of the many many purple adjectives I have wasted on former issues. Both good and bad. Because now when I want to tell you just how good an ish this was—and how very good *The Seed from Space* was—I am unable to summon words to describe it. It was *that* good.

All I can say is, "Just keep it up and you'll be head, shoulders and torso above *all* your competitors. Even the cover was nice. Also I noted your heretofore mystifying name on the contents page. So now we know—and *I* knew all the time.—*R.F.D. No. 3, Peebles, Ohio.*

Glad you liked us in May, Ivan—keep up the good work.

THAT ENDING!
by Carol Rae McKinney

Dear Editor: Just finished the May issue of SS and on the whole found the stories a little better than usual. But the lead novel—*The Seed from Space*—was well written, had a plot developing nicely and had me believing the hero would eventually triumph and live happily ever after with the heroine. And then—bang?—the very last page changed everything with the Avra overmind subtly conquering Earth and subduing our hero and his heroine's minds. Oh well, they lived happily ever after anyway—or did they? It was a better-than-average novel.

The best story in the issue by far was *The Walls Came Tumbling Down.* A story written from an alien viewpoint is always good—providing the author knows what he is doing and John Wyndham apparently did. The last Futuremen novelet was disappointing and the rest of the series was better. Sorry there won't be any more though and I hope someday to see these stories revived again.

Letters of Fire was second best in the story ratings although it did drag a little at times. I happen to like stories where aliens pose as Earthmen or women, especially when they are the central characters. *Tame Me This Beast* was only fair. It could have easily been made into a novelet or perhaps even a short novel by not killing off the main characters so quickly.

The last story, *A Taxable Dimension,* I rate third. Why is it that the short stories usually turn out better than the novelets and novels? However, I am looking forward eagerly to Leigh Brackett's novelet, *The Woman from Altair,* in the July issue. Somehow, no matter how long or short her stories are, they always rate high with me.

Will you please tell me (if you dare) *who* in the galaxy chooses the letters that go into ETHER-GRAMS? A friend of mine says she had sent about ten letters to you and none of them ever got printed. I'm especially curious because the only two I ever wrote to you both got in.—*3500 Shelden Street, Del Paso Heights, California.*

We choose the letters all by our collective selves, Carol Rae. We file them in a desk drawer until department time rolls around once more, then pull them out, separate the SS missives from the TWS dittoes and begin to weed. The process usually takes us at least a couple of hours and three wastebaskets. We try to run letters we think will amuse those who read the column or have something of interest to say to them. Sorry about your friend and hope we do better

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by her or vice versa in the near future. As for the ending on the Pratt novel we felt that it was a relief to have humanity take it on the chin for a change.

JUST ONE MORE STEP
by Ronald Kidder

Dear Sam: At last you've come out into the open. Just one more step to the perfect. And I must say that SS and TWS are well on their way. Now a list of your accomplishments to date (in '50 and '51). First different covers, then semi-slick paper and larger print in the reader column. And now we know the editor's name. Thank you very much.

In reading your letter column I see that you have already received many congratulations on Bergey's new covers but I would like to add mine to the pile. Congrats.

Now to brass tacks. And I hope you sit on one if you ever print another novel like the one in this ish. I didn't start reading stf until '48 but from what I hear you turned out some pretty lousy stuff before 1945. This should have been printed then and then it should have *died.* That's so I wouldn't have had to struggle through it like I did. I kept reading and reading, hoping for the best, but all I got out of my lost time was lost time.

Letters of Fire was the best story in the issue. In fact if it wasn't for the occasional flop like *The Seed from Space* there is nothing to stop SS from becoming the best sf mag in the business. Okay, I'll drop it. Anybody can make a mistake. But no more! I also want to say that though I like the new trend towards the stories giving the effect of Earth on Alien People, please don't let it get overworked. I notice that there are two stories like this in the current mag and there have been several in your competitors' mags.

Birthplace of Creation was one of the old "the hero overwhelms the mad scientist" things and it provided a fitting burial for the current Cap Future series.

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down was tied with *A Taxable Dimension* for second spot. These good stories are all that stop the ish from falling way below par. As it is it is only slightly below par. *Tame Me This Beast* was about average.

In answer to Les & Es Coles—how would fty do for an abreviation for fantasy. Not so good, huh?

Oh, I forgot to say that I would like a story on the effects of Alien People on Alien People. That would be fun wouldn't it—or would it?—*9 Glenvalley Drive, Mt. Dennis, Toronto 9, Ontario.*

Darned if we know, Ronald—but it would be a terror to write. Alien people on alien people—hmmmm. Sounds like one of fandom's open letters.

US YOUTHS
by Shelby Vick

Sam, ole dear: Wonderful! Apparently, everyone's hollering finally reached the ears of Whoever It Should. I say that, for I see you've finally been given complete sayso over what goes into the mag. I'm also pleased by those four little words that have been added to the bottom of the contents page.

SEED FROM SPACE was good but I think both novelets beat it. BIRTHPLACE, first (real fitting—in the last of the series old World-Saver goes himself one better and saves the universe!) then LETTERS OF FIRE. Best of the others was AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN.

Peter Poulton astounds me. Sometimes his illos are repulsive, sometimes better than the average Lawrence. If he could reach a consistent high he'd be a favorite.

I've been avoiding a retaliation to Joe Gibson—not purposefully, just haven't had the time. Now, with your kind permission, I'd like to correct a remark of slur that he cast Florida way. I can't speak for Miami beaches but on the Gulf Coast (especially in Northwest Florida) the fems are no bems (Broad-Ended Madams.) Some of 'em can put a Bergey cover to shame. Also, Joe—you can *tell* me that fem fen are oftentime beauties but I can only go by my own experience. Of course, maybe my standards are just a bit different from Joseph's.

And Sam—since I was one of the 'younger readers' referred to in your editorial I'd like to say something that, I believe, expresses the general opinion of most of us youths—beardless and otherwise. Sure, we know age is there at the end of the trail if we're—fortunate?—enough to live so long. It's inevitable. We have no intention to deny it or even "resent being reminded of it." The general idea is just that such stories are beyond our sympathies for the most part.

So many of an old person's motives and purposes differ so widely from our own—well, you admitted yourself that a backlog of experience that only age gives you means a lot. I won't be so bold as to ask you to curtail the printing of such stories—after all I'm prejudiced—because you must have many readers who enjoy them. But when they near senility, don't expect me to enjoy them. So far only George R Stewart in his EARTH ABIDES (have you read it? You should. It's good) has succeeded in making me like such.

As for Bergey's covers—interesting change, but I'm still waiting.—*Box 493, Lynn Haven, Fla.*

Upon doing a bit of mental backtracking ourselves, Shelby, we find the idea of any youngster isolating him or herself with only his or her age group a horrifying one. We always had fascinating and utterly understandable friends of all ages in our pre-beard years. And have had ever since. How can anyone hope to learn anything otherwise?

MORE OF THOSE THINGS
by Calvin Thomas Beck

Dear Editor Sam: Congratulations, congratulations and more congrats on your May ish of S.S. SEED FROM SPACE is not only one of the best—if not *the* best—pieces of fiction penned by the distinguished F. Pratt but the best feature length novel to have ever appeared in S.S., excluding the

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immortal Weinbaum's BLACK FLAME which, I think, appeared in the inaugural issue of S.S. Both S.S. and T.W.S. seem to be undergoing a marvelous period of reincarnation, or somethin', which has been noted assiduously by this humble writer. If I may make a suggestion, why not have TWS specialize in the scientifiction type stories and SS handle the weird, fantastic and horror type yarns! The suggestion, she is not so good, no?

I found your TEV editorial particularly thought-provoking since you bring out the question of schisms existing between youth and age. I feel that it can be covered solely by stating that youth does not wish to accept the fact that it is but a hop and a skip away from maturity—whereas the majority of the so-called mature either forget they were ever young or never have tried to grow up *mentally!*

There's little doubt that if youth and age could compromise, great strides would be feasible in the educational, social and mental status of individuals.

That "children must be seen and not heard" and that the aged are *impedimenta* is as ridiculous as to consider a refulfillment of the Age of Victorianism in 1951.

Charles Baird states in TEV that he'd like more pages in SS or TWS. I am more enthusiastic in having a STFantasy publication go in for a format that would be able to embrace quality with a capital "Q" in its entirety, stemming from cover to cover, illustrations, design and a high regard for the craftsmanship of its contents and the deuce with the bulkiness of the 'zine if such matters are neglected, sez I.

Also, as in all trades and professions, there are those who can be counted upon to do a fine job each time they are asked to do it, while some can't be accredited with competence all of the time. It's the ed's job to keep after writers who have never let him down more so than to keep after those of whom have not made a hit with ed and reader alike.

No other particular comment on TEV except that I'm relieved to note absence of the "Gee! Gosh! Great Martian Midgets" variety of letters. As I always sez, humor is out of place when pointless and irrelevant to anything and when a motive is not evident. At this pernt I'd like to remark I am only twenty-one years old, and this is only my fifty-sixth letter to an SF 'zine. Pliz, Samuel, put hose!—*7312 Blvd. East, North Bergen, New Jersey, Suite 2-C.*

For heaven's sake, why, Calvin? The only hitch in devoting TWS to pseudo science and SS to fantasy, horror, etc., is that it would mean limiting one type of tale to each lead story length as things are arranged at present—which would mean passing over some darn good stories that didn't happen to fit. We'd like to have a hand in your ideal magazine as well, Calvin, if you will show us a publisher willing to lose money on same.

FS TO YOU TOO
by Robert Marlow

Dear Sam: I see you have decided to let the readers know your name. I am glad you did, because I never did like a coward. I always read the Ethergrams first, so I will write about them first. I see that Joe Gibson is up to his old tricks again. Whatever you do don't let him influence you into changing your covers. A magazine cover should indicate what is contained therein, and because science-fiction is the main feature in your mag, make it the theme of your covers.

Burgey's females look natural, and nice on the new cover style, not like those ridiculous things he used to paint. This seeming to be your latest policy, I want to encourage you to keep up the good work. It does seem, however, that the May issue girl is a slight return to the old style. I'm referring to the blouse that seems to be made of leather but I daresay it just couldn't be that.

Did someone ask what a good abbreviation for Fantasy would be? How about a reversal of SF, thus FS? Well, don't say I didn't try.

You should thank me. I have, over the past months, introduced a new fan to SF. It all started when I lent him or rather forced him to borrow my pocket edition of F. Brown's *What Mad Universe.* Since then he has read *Donovan's Brain, The Big Eye* and a few volumes from my collection of SF magazines. He is even buying a few mags for himself.

Have you anything lined up by Murray Leinster? I have only read four stories by him and one wasn't SF but next to vV he's tops. How about getting something by John R. Fearn also? And of course I wouldn't object to a few stories by van Vogt.

I was downright disappointed by *The Seed from Space* after the build-up you gave it. You had practically promised that we would enjoy it completely while I don't think I would care to re-read it the way I have many other stories you have printed.

Your Galactic Catastrophes on page 10 made me shiver. The type of story that you list as 'wrong' really is that but I can't say I would be pleased to see you print any more stories like *The Seed from Space.* It is a perfect example of the kind of thing that my writing instructors warned me against.

"Always have your protagonist come out on top," they say. Your authors should write stories that are a happy medium between the two types you illustrate. If you are going to accept only stories of the SFSpace type my latest manuscript might just as well be tossed to the wind. It would be impossible to slant it to your needs.

Who is the artist responsible for the illustrations for SFSpace? It wouldn't be Virgil Finlay? No? I recognize it as by the same who illustrated vV's *Shadowmen.* Also Blish's *Let The Finder Beware* and a couple of other stories. He's certainly your best illustrator.

Letters of Fire and *Birthplace of Creation* were tops. Your shorts were pretty good too, which makes it a fair edition.

STARTLING is back to the small size, I see. That goes for TWS also. What goes on here? Can't you get the newsprint?

This business of turning to the viewpoint of the aged is very heartbreaking. How can the young authors tell a story from a viewpoint which they cannot see. I don't think your young readers want to read about the aged and the aged would like to read about youth, which they cannot experience in any other medium.

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It appears to be your opinion that 'senility' is 'maturity'. In your editorial you repeatedly use the word 'maturity' where the former should be used. You must have looked in the mirror and seen your hair turning gray. That ain't age, man, we fen are responsible for that. Throw a few more letters in the wastepaper basket and that bothersome malady will vanish, quick-like.

With that thought in mind. I get ready to close this missive. First, however, I want to mention that I really enjoyed 1951 WSA. Its trimmed edges were a joy to behold. The cover wasn't so hot, however, which means it couldn't have been by Bergey. My mother, who has never read SF, was attracted by the trimmed edges and the unconspicuous cover. She didn't read any of it but she did examine the index page and glanced at the illos, so it means that trimmed edges might introduce many new readers and fans to the field.—*Invermere, British Columbia.*

As for trimmed edges, we have tried, Robert, but to no avail. The top opinion seems to be that the increased cost would not be justified. The illustrator you mention is Stevens and the small size is due to a change in printers, which also resulted in the better quality paper.

Finally we did not mean senility when we spoke of maturity—nor is our hair even slightly grey yet. What's more we've still got all of it. As for the elderly envying youth we don't think many do—they've had it and most of them feel with the late GBS that it is too fine a thing to be wasted on children.

For news of Leinster see *Looking Ahead* this issue.

TETCHING
by Wanita Norris, S.N.

Dear Editor: I'm a student nurse but that doesn't keep me from being an avid science fiction fan. However, my fellow students seem to think I'm slightly "teched" in my choice of literature. Do you suppose some fellow fans would care to write and reassure me?—*118 West Douglas Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana.*

The chances are that you'll get plenty of missives from fellow fans, Wanita—but we can't help wondering how reassuring they will be. You might reassure us yourself on this score after getting a few. Here's hoping you win your cap in a hurry.

MUTTON NO MORE
by J. L. Zwirner

Dear Mr. Merwin (Mutton-no-more): So at last you've admitted it—your name that is. Another step of progress. The May issue of SS arrived on the newsstands and was favorably received in these quarters. Everyone talks first about the cover when they write you. Who am I to flout a tradition? Therefore I would like to say that the last five on TWS-SS were the best since the old WS folded.

Incidentally, I notice that TEVers compared Bergey's Jan. covers unfavorably with the work of Bonestell. Having eyes, I must agree. However, the January cover struck me as having more emotional impact than much of Ches' work. But how about some more unusual subjects? F'rinstance, How about something by Ley or DeCamp on Paleogeography—cover showing the ice-capped Earth of the Pleistocene age? Or the early continental difference? The Early Paleozoic Earth would not only have land-masses of different size and shape than today but they would be colored red. See what I mean?

Now the Stories. Pratt's novel was much like *Onslaught from Rigel* & *Well of the Unicorn*—same excellent idea, same ditto plot & characterization, same wooden style.

Letter of Fire was an elegantly written piece. Only one thing wrong. Lee mentioned that the strengthened U.N. was making earth into Eden, presumably for all the inhabitants thereof. Then he said that only one year of work is required of each citizen. Then he spoke of the hero's "Oriental servants". No wonder they (the Asiatics) distrust our offer of Eden if that's their lot. Incidentally, when your authors assume a world state, have 'em make it a more cosmopolitan affair—de Camps' doing this lends both charm & verisimilitude to his tales.

Wyndham's short is next. Some really new twists to the silicon-life deal.

Williams and Hamilton rate only a ho-hum. Mines woulda been OK in the STF dark ages of 1944-45 but not today.

One final note to fade off in the distance—how about combining SS and TWS to form a monthly? The exasperating two-month wait would be cut in half. The novels could run as serials—a practice one of your newer competitors found approved by much of its audience.—*1163 Hague Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

All we'd need would be paleographic covers, methinks, J. L. Frankly this particular suggestion leaves us in the refrigerator tray. Your point about the Oriental servants well taken—blame it on Lee's careless and built-in snobbery. We only wish both magazines were monthlies—they'd keep us busy but in a very good cause.

FANTASY-SCHMANTASY
by Bob Hoskins

Dear Merwin: The latest SS is quite good for the most part. The only thing that I couldn't digest was the latest Futurenovelet. Cap and his *compadres* are beginning to pall. Perhaps in a year or so I'll like it.

I do not call your *Letters of Fire* fantasy. This belongs to the lead novel. But your own little gem is most definitely stf of the space opera type. John Beynon Harris was tops in the short line-up with Samuel Mines a close second and Bob Williams a lagging third.

The novel was especially well-liked by this one because of its most unusual ending. But you will now be flooded with a whole series of stories of

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this type once the authors realize there is a market for this class.

Illustrations are terrible with the exception of the Poulton for *Tame Me This Beast.* He shows signs of developing into a top fantasy illustrator. Just one warning—keep him away from stf. His talent does not lie in that direction.

One question—*why* in the name of Cthulhu and the Old Ones did you change the size of *Startling?* Doity trick.

I thought latest WSA was much better than the 1950 job. I recently got a copy of the first ish of SS. Impressions? It smelled to high heaven! The Weinbaum novel saved it from being a total flop and even that was at best only mediocre. Am very disappointed.

As I think I said in my letter for the April TWS I'd like to see you publish pics of your more prominent letter writers, which be all for now. May the good Lord bless and keep you for another month while I build up my strength in preparation to the dissecting of ye Edde.—*Lyons Falls, New York.*

Get good and strong, Bob. We shall try to produce a strong magazine if not a good one. Then you can dissect to your little heart's content. Do we hear someone say, whilst holding nose, that we don't have to *try* to produce a strong magazine? We don't? Disappointing, wot?

We have already answered the reduced-size query.

HAILSTORM OF FAREWELL
by Les & Es Cole

Dear Sam: That *is* your name on the masthead, isn't it?

Firstly, about this Lysenkoism, we discovered something which gave us pause to wonder. We were speaking to a Marxist friend of ours—and those people can make you so damnably uncomfortable because of their dogmatic rationalization—about how the USSR had alienated so many US liberals by the many blunders she's pulled lately and cited the Lysenko controversy as an example.

He looked us straight in the eye (or eyes) and said, "What do you know about the work Lysenko has done? Have you read the original sources?" We, of course, had to reply in the negative. And he had us. Now the point is, who the devil has read the original sources? Do any of us lesser mutationists really know what Lysenko said? We know what he's purported to have said but that's a different matter altogether.

It's the end of an era, Sam. We're leaving you. The reasons for this are various and sundry, but they can be summed up rather briefly. Firstly we have unalterably opposed views on science fiction. We like ours heavy on the science and even heavier on literature. We realize that we are living in the days of the past, before the war, when men were men, and the contents of the average *Astounding* contained Heinlein, McDonald, van Vee, del Rey, Sturgeon, Boucher and a few of the lesser lights like Kuttner.

You, on the other hand, like pseudo (or no) science and no literature. (Those wild replies of yours can be very incriminating!) You are of the school that holds up "What Mad Universe" as the epitome of "science fiction". We thought the story terrible.

Finally you aren't the same guy you were four years ago. At the time you led us to believe you were trying to build a mag that would be more mature and appeal to such as we in regard to our reading tastes. Somewhere you got sidetracked. You were anonymous in those days—truly so—but you've finally succumbed to "I-am-god" attitude so prevalent among editors.

You were a fighter then too. Had you had, four years ago, the going-over we gave you in the May SS, you would have come out of your corner breathing fire and given as much as you took. Instead you just suggest that we soak our heads in the amassed works of Einstein. (We have.)

But it has been fun these last years. Perhaps we'll meet at New Orleans this September? In the meantime we're going to resoak our heads in the amassed works of Albert Einstein. There's romance there!—*3040½ Adeline St., Berkeley 5, California.*

In May it was Palmer—now the Coles. *Tsk, tsk!* The type of stf magazine the Coles have been advocating would have us snoring in a matter of days—and it would take days to read.

Still, we're sorry to lose them. And their departing shot leaves us in a fine mood of melancholy until next we get at this sort of thing. Best of luck to all of you, including both Coles. Someone ought to take them across the continent to visit the Edmond Hamiltons. That would be carrying Coles to New Castle with a vengeance. Forgive us, Leigh and Ed. And so long, everyone.

—THE EDITOR.

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

THE STAR WATCHERS

A Novel of Intrigue in Space

By ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

and

THE GAMBLERS

A Novelet of Lunar Adventure

By MACK REYNOLDS and FREDRIC BROWN

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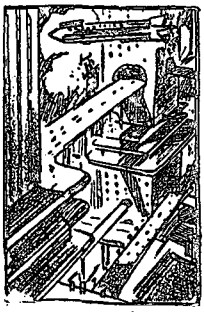
REVIEW OF THE CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

FIRST item on the agendum is the *Bulletin #1* of the Ninth World Science Fiction Convention, taking place Labor Day week end (September 1st, 2nd, 3rd) in New Orleans, Louisiana. The man to write for further information and to whom to address membership dues is Harry B. Moore, 2703 Camp Street,



New Orleans 13. The Nolacon looks like the scene of the coming great debate (stf-style) on dianetics as well as a fine fangathering. So get to it if you can.

A pair of poetry pamphlets have turned up this time with Lin Carter's SANDALWOOD AND JADE barely nosing out the most recent edition of Lilith Lorraine's CHALLENGE. The first, a one-shot, can be purchased for an unlisted price from Mr. Carter, 1743 Newark Street, St. Petersburg, Florida. The second, a quarterly, retails for 30c per copy ($1.00 per annum) from Rogers, Arkansas. Both seem to us to be well worth while and the small expense demanded.

If you wish to be a life member of Antarctic Colony Associates, all you have to do is send $1 thousand to $40 million to Vice President Quinn Bass Jr. at Box #2232, Jacksonville 4, Florida. One hundred to $999 will win you a 10-year sustaining membership, $10 to $99 a two-year ditto and a contribution of $2 to $9 will make you a regular member for a term of one year. The society's 10-page

[*Turn page*]

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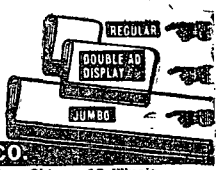

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brochure further announces that Rear Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd, USN (Ret.) is unable to accept a draft-vote for the presidency because he is currently on active duty. The rest is up to you-all.

With mixed feelings we now wish to announce the breakdown of our recent review system, which briefly analyzed a first-ten among current fanzines and merely noted the rest. Thanks to a diabolical conspiracy on the part of faneditors and authors we find ourselves this time compelled to review twenty (count em, 20!) 'zines instead of a mere half score. And so, with head in hands, et cetera, let us put our shoulder to the grindstone.

CENSORED, 5770 Cote St. Luc, NDG, Montreal, P. Q. Editor, Fred Hurter, Jr. Published irregularly. 20c per copy, 3 copies 50c.

Far and away the most ambitious edition of this Canadian leader, featuring a two-page full-length novel by Allan Bernfeld entitled FWROTSICT, numerous mildly amusing cartoon pages and spots, a reprint of the Rhodo-Digest-JWCampbell Jr. article on Dianetics and considerable pleasant feature material on last summer's Hydra Club conventions in Manhattan.

All in all a very nice job.

FAN-FARE, 119 Ward Road, North Tonawanda, New York. Editor, W. Paul Ganly. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 6 issues 65c.

Sound fan-fiction by Alice Bullock, Frank McNamar and Franklin M. Seller, along with intelligent book review and chatter, fair verse and features make up for a sparse and scrammy art job inside and out.

THE FANSCIENT, 3435 NE 38th Avenue, Portland 13, Oregon. Editor, Donald B. Day. Final issue. 50c.

The third anniversary edition of an all-time top fanzine is not only its largest and perhaps its most worth-while but, alack, its last. L. Sprague de Camp draws the final pro-profile and the whole Portland gang—Miles Eaton, Dale Conaldson, Tom Carter, H. T. McAdams, to say nothing of such outsiders as Lin Carter, Hannes Bok and, of course, Ralph Rayburn Phillips and Editor Day—have turned out to make it a memorable job. Editor Day informs us he still has plenty of back issues and that a quarter will win both list and sample. A must for those that have missed in the past.

FANTASY ADVERTISER, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, California. Editor, Ronald Squire. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 75c per annum.

Fifth anniversary issue of the best swap-and-collector's journal in stf. Editor Squire has a few items to say anent his pride and joy and, amid a welter of well-printed reviews and advertisements, it contains the second and final installment of Arthur C. Clarke's memorable "Space-Travel in Fact and Fiction."

FANTASY-TIMES, 137-02 32 Avenue, Flushing, New York. Editor, James V. Taurasi. Published twice monthly. 10c per copy, 12 issues $1.00.

The ablest of fanzines, year in and year out, continues to pack its green and white pages with the sort of news all fans want from all over—what gives with stf. And its junior edition, FAN-VETS, continues to thrive as a special service for stfaddicts in uniform.

IMPOSSIBLE, 3933 15th NE, Seattle 5, Washington. Editor, Burnett R. Tosky. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

Much improved—and Mr. Tosky's "The Editor Croaks" contains not only a sound suggestion in his title but an actually amusing assault on prozines. Lee Hoffman, W. Kraus, L. F. Blanchard, Phillip Barker and Wally Weber are also on hand to enliven the proceedings.

THE JOURNAL OF SPACE FLIGHT, 424 North Grant St., Hinsdale, Illinois. Editor, Robert Friberg. Published monthly. 25c per copy, $2.25 per annum.

"Silicon as a Base for Life Forms" by N. J. Bowman forms title and thesis of the lead article in the most recent (March) edition. In general too technical for our interest but certainly a sequoia among fanzines of specialized appeal.

MEZRAB, P. O. Box #431, Tahoka, Texas. Editors, the Bradleys. Published quarterly. No price listed.

The Robert A. (Marion Zimmer) Bradleys ride again amid a welter of tried-and-untrue fan-names which includes Joe Kennedy, Rick Sneary, and some fine acid comment on stffairs in general, to say nothing of prose and verse and a spattering of artwork better off dead.

ODD, 1302 Lester Street, Poplar Bluffs, Missouri. Editor, Duggie Fisher, Jr. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 2 issues 25c.

A large lashing of sub-sophomorism raises hob with an otherwise entertaining issue, in which Ed Cox laments recent astronomical theories on Venus (which virtually dehydrate that once-so-wet planet), Elsberry takes pot-shots at prozines and others and Paul Cox vies with some artists (?) who shall be mercifully nameless for the betatron-lined earmuffs.

OPERATION FANTAST, Editor, Captain K. F. Slater, 13 Gp. RCP, BAOR 15, c/o GPO England. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 6 issues 60c.

Captain Slater continues to blend his own editorials, reviews and features and fiction by overseas adepts into a pleasing mixture that totes up to the ablest fanzine published at present in Great Britain. Furthermore he accomplished this protean feat while at long range, in Germany with the Army of Occupation.

ORGASM, 3040½ Adeline Street, Berkeley 3, California. Editors, Les & Es Cole and Corporal

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Clarence L. Jacobs. Published quarterly. No price listed.

The second issue of the Coles-Jacobs combine is, to our way of thinking, an improvement over its promising inaugural despite the letter on pages 24-25. John W. Campbell Jr., Poul Anderson, the editors and others contribute the fun and games with amiable acidity. If only they'd change that title!

PEON, Editor, Charles Lee Riddle, PN1, USN, Fleet All Weather Training Unit, Pacific. c/o Fleet PO, San Francisco, California. Published quarterly. 9 issues $1.00.

Master Joe Kennedy tees off on prozine covers, that Aardvark thing tackles dianetics and Tony Boucher lists a few fantasy operas in what shapes up as this Navy fanzine's best edition thus far. The Tsathoggua item threw us but not enough to make the issue as a whole suffer too much. Nice work, Lieutenant Riddle.

PHANTASMAGORIA, 41 Crompton Street, Dudley Hill, Bradford, Yorkshire, England. Editors, Derek & Mavis Pickles. Published quarterly. 2d per annum.

Second best Great Britain fanzine, much improved from last edition. Fiction is only fair but verse is rather good and Walt Willis and Mr. Pickles contribute strongly on the feature side.

QUANDRY, 101 Wagner Street, Savannah, Georgia. Editor, Lee Hoffman. Published monthly. 10c per copy $1.00 per annum.

A good solid issue, thanks to contributions by Walt Willis, Shelby Vick, Burnett Tosky, Gerry de la Ree, Wildie Conner, Ken Beale, Earle Franklin Baker, F. T. Laney, R. J. Banks Jr., Battell Loomis, Russell Watkins, Bob Silverberg and other leading lights of Southern fandom. In short, even without Joe Kennedy, how can it miss with this lineup? Laney the funniest in our opinion.

QUANTA, P. O. Box #7595 Benjamin Franklin Station, Washington 4, D. C. Editor, Franklin Kerkhof. Final issue.

Another promising 'zine winds itself up, this time under the sponsorship of the Washington Science Fiction Association. For the most part it is packed with how-to-do articles including tips on fanetiquette by one who lists himself under the by-line of M. I. Nuts (misspelled *Nutes* on contents page)!

RHODOMAGNETIC DIGEST, Garden Library, 2524 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley 4, California. Editor, George Blumenson. Published bi-monthly. 25c per copy, 10 copies $2.25.

The March edition of the current top fanzine was up toward the top of its own ladder. We nearly knocked ourselves out over the whiskey-drinking-mathematician conundrum until Bill Murr explained it, enjoyed Walt Willis' attack on a prozine editorial—thought we'd like to argue with Willis anent some points of same if we weren't so lazy—found the staff-written reviews excellent, Silverberg's collector's hor-

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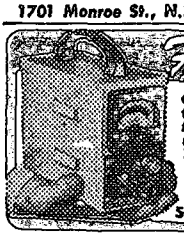

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ror feature funny and Fabun's packaging piece fascinating. In short, we liked the whole damned thing.

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS LETTER, P. O. Box #260. Editor, Bob Tucker. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 7 issues $1.00.

This one-time little newzine continues to grow in all good directions. Reviews, polls and gossip column are still what they should be (a model for competitors) and the 1950 book and magazine checklists especially deserving of comment as worth-while contributions.

SPACESHIP, 760 Montgomery Street, Brooklyn 13, New York. Editors, Bob Silverberg & Saul Diskin. Published quarterly. 10c per copy, 3 issues 25c.

Well, this one finally makes what used to be the A-list with a fine full issue containing adequate fiction by J. R. Adams and David English, intriguing features by B. Chandler, Harry Warner, Jr., the editor and even Orville Prescott (culled from the N.Y. *Times*) as well as a solid sprinkling of departments and poetry. Glad to see you up here, fellows, and hope you keep on moving.

TIMA, 408 West Bell Street, Statesville, North Carolina. Editor, Lynn A. Hickman. Published quarterly. 25c per copy, $1.00 per annum.

Manly Banister tees off on dianetics with something close to brilliance, Basil Wells and Wilkie Conner contribute good features and Nancy Moore has herself a fine time with lost worlds of the Matto Grosso. Fiction by Loomis and Fruchey is fair, as is Myrtice Taylor's poem and the departments. A good first effort.

WOOMERA, 184 Girraween Road, Girraween, N. S.W., Australia. Editor, Nick Solntseff. Published bi-monthly (?). 15c per copy.

A beautifully printed little job with an intelligent survey of US prozines by Graham Stone, a ditto of British dittoes by Rog Dard, an Australian fan directory, the front half of a neatly literary little story by Vol Molesworth and a brief fanfeature by Royce Williams. Worth more than the list-price if you can get your hands on it.

A fine listing, withal. And now to briefer noting of the not quite so good. . . .

ADOZINE, 2058 E. Atlantic St., Philadelphia 34, Pennsylvania. Editor unlisted. Published bi-monthly. 5c per copy.

BEELZEBUB, 1455 Townsend Avenue, New York 52, New York. Editor, Morton D. Paley. Published quarterly. 10c per copy.

THE CENTAURIAN, 104 Mountain View Drive, Dalton, Georgia. Editor, unlisted. Published bi-monthly. No price listed.

CHIMERICAL REVIEW, 942 Scribner Avenue, NW, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Editors, John Kalas & Dennis Strong. Published monthly. 15c per copy.

CONTOUR, 6001 43rd Avenue, Hyattsville, Maryland. Editor, Bob Pavlat. Published quarterly. No price listed.

FANTASY AMATEUR, P. O. Box #6, Helena, Montana. Editor, Walter A. Coslet. Published quarterly. No price listed.

FANVARIETY, 420 South 11th Street, Poplar Bluffs, Missouri. Editor, W. Max Keasler. Published monthly. 10c per copy, 6 issues 50c.

HORIZONS, 303 Bryant Place, Hagerstown, Maryland. Editor, Harry Warner Jr. Published quarterly. No price listed.

HYSTERIA, 942 Scriber NW, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Editors, John Kalas & Dennis Strong. One-shot.

LIGHT, P. O. Box #121, Parry Sound, Ontario, Canada. Editor, Leslie A. Croutch. Published irregularly. 5c per copy.

PHANTEUR, P. O. Box #445, Imperial, Nebraska. Editor, D. B. Thompson. Published irregularly. No price listed.

MFS BULLETIN, 413 East 18th Street, Minneapolis 4, Minnesota. Published monthly. No price listed.

MOBIUS, 115 East Mosholu Parkway, Bronx 67, New York. Editor, Ken Beale. One-shot. No price listed.

NEWSSCOPE, 43 Tremont Street, Malden 48, Massachusetts. Editor, Ray Campbell. Published monthly. 5c per copy, 50c per annum.

THE SCIENCE FICTION ASSORTMENT, 127 Shephard Avenue, Newark 8, New Jersey. Editor, Sam Moskowitz. Published quarterly. No price listed.

SIRIUS, 1308 Hoe Avenue, Bronx 59, New York. Editor, Stan Sirxner. Published quarterly. 15c per copy.

SNULBUG, 413 East 18th Street, Minneapolis 4, Minnesota. Editor, Richard Eisberry. Published bi-monthly. No price listed.

THE TRILOBITE, 2146 Stanmore Drive, Houston, Texas. Editor, M. McNeil. Published quarterly. No price listed.

ZAP, 5503-28th Street SE, Washington, D. C. Editor, unlisted. One-shot. No price listed.

Which rounds up quite a round-up. So we'll beg off without further comment until we reunveil ourselves as a fancritic in the October TWS. Until then . . .

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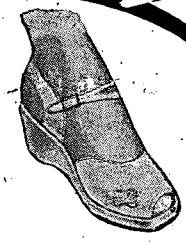

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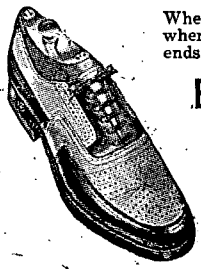

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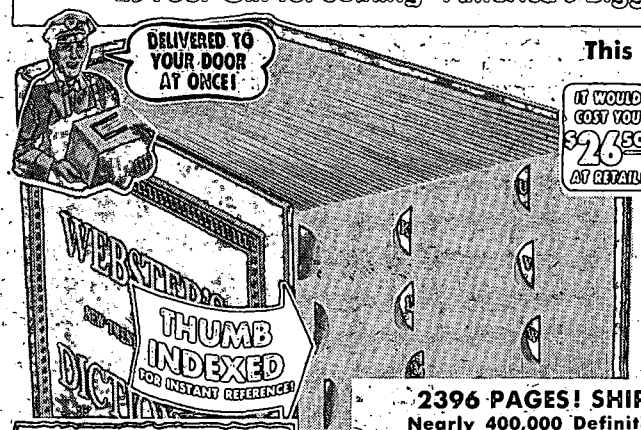

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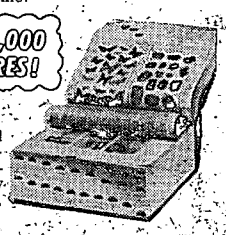

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